

**‘Bringing Me More Than I Contain’:  
Levinas, Ethical Subjectivity and the  
Infinite Demands of Education**

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## Abstract

Emmanuel Levinas's reorientation of ethics as preceding ontology and his radical presentation of responsibility, justice, consciousness and knowledge are of clear relevance for education. It is therefore not surprising that in the last decade we have seen a number of studies of Levinas by educational theorists.

Much of this work has focused on Levinas's relevance for issues of ethics, social justice, multiculturalism and moral education. This thesis draws on this previous research, but aims to take educational readings of Levinas in another direction through considering how his presentation of discourse, language and subjectivity, as dependent on an infinite ethical demand, troubles several dominant orientations within educational discourse that treat education in ways that can become totalising and instrumentalist.

I begin by offering a philosophical analysis of how Levinas describes the scene of teaching and the nature of subjectivity. I then interrogate how this reading of Levinas disturbs some current understandings of education: first, the way that, within liberalism, education can be conceived instrumentally as the site for the development of a certain kind of individual (a rationally autonomous chooser, etc.), and second, the way that neoliberal educational ideologies have privileged managerialism, performance and the market, with Religious Education providing a case study of the implications of Levinas's interruption. I then consider how this leads to new understandings of community and political subjectivity within education.

In this way, I explore how responding to Levinas, and reading his work together with criticisms addressed by Badiou and others, leads us not just to a richer vision of the meaning of education, but also to a more motivating understanding of the ethical subjectivity of both students and teachers, which is dependent on a deepening and anarchic responsibility, and which invites us to work for a better education extending beyond the straight line of the law.

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Anna Strhan". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Anna" and last name "Strhan" clearly distinguishable.

Anna Strhan

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Material in various chapters has been published elsewhere, and a list of these publications is provided in the appendix.

## List of Abbreviations

### Works by Levinas

<i>BV</i>	<i>Beyond the Verse</i>
<i>BW</i>	<i>Basic Philosophical Writings</i>
<i>CP</i>	<i>Collected Philosophical Papers</i>
<i>DF</i>	<i>Difficult Freedom</i>
<i>DEH</i>	<i>Discovering Existence with Husserl</i>
<i>EE</i>	<i>Existence and Existents</i>
<i>GDT</i>	<i>God, Death, and Time</i>
<i>GM</i>	<i>Of God Who Comes To Mind</i>
<i>LR</i>	<i>The Levinas Reader</i>
<i>OE</i>	<i>On Escape</i>
<i>OB</i>	<i>Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence</i>
<i>OS</i>	<i>Outside the Subject</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Is It Righteous To Be?</i>
<i>RPH</i>	<i>'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism'</i>
<i>THP</i>	<i>The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology</i>
<i>TI</i>	<i>Totality and Infinity</i>
<i>TN</i>	<i>In the Time of Nations</i>
<i>TR</i>	<i>Nine Talmudic Readings</i>

### Works by Badiou

<i>BE</i>	<i>Being and Event</i>
<i>E</i>	<i>Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil</i>
<i>HI</i>	<i>Handbook of Inaesthetics</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>Metapolitics</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism</i>

# Introduction

## Why Levinas? Why Subjectivity?

On 6<sup>th</sup> January 2006, the French newspaper *Le Monde*, responding to the centennial celebrations of Emmanuel Levinas's birth, published an article entitled, 'Generation Levinas?' (Lévy, 2006). This question could be seen, as Seán Hand notes in a recent introduction to Levinas, as 'in itself confirm[ing] Levinas's rapid rise from respected footnote of phenomenology to key representative of a decisive shift in Western philosophy's history' (Hand, 2009, p. 109). Since his death in 1995, the influence of the Lithuanian-born philosopher has moved far beyond post-war philosophical reflection, permeating critical theory, theology, aesthetics, sociology, psychoanalysis, human rights theory, war studies, literary and legal theory. That influence is still extending, so that it might reasonably be claimed that Jacques Derrida was right to state, in the speech he gave at Levinas's funeral, subsequently published in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, that the work of Levinas is 'so large one can no longer glimpse its edges' (Derrida, 1999, p. 3):

One can predict with confidence that centuries of readings will set this as their task. We already see innumerable signs, well beyond France and Europe ... that the reverberations of this thought will have changed the course of philosophical reflection in our time, and of our reflection *on* philosophy, on what orders it according to ethics, according to another thought of ethics, responsibility, justice, the State, etc., according to another thought of the other, a thought that is newer than so many novelties because it is ordered according to the absolute anteriority of the face of the Other.

Yes, ethics before and beyond ontology (pp. 3-4).

In light of this, it is not surprising that over the last decade, we have seen a number of studies of Levinas in relation to education.<sup>1</sup> It is fair to say, however, that among many educational theorists, there is suspicion that recent interest in Levinas is attributable purely to his currently being in vogue, and that the present prominence of his work may be a passing trend. The obsessive quality of his uncompromising writing remains opaque, or at least counter-intuitive, to many working within education. Yet the concerns of Levinas's philosophy are of obvious significance for how we think about education on all levels. In her introduction to *Levinas and Education*, Denise Egéa-Kuehne emphasises this:

His concepts of ethics, justice, consciousness, and moral conscience are deeply relevant to education, as they were developed through the face-to-face encounter with the other, through intersubjective relation, and through the responsibility and respect one must develop for the Other as Other – notions which rest at the very heart of education (Egéa-Kuehne, 2008, p. 1).

This thesis will be concerned with taking up and thinking further through the ways in which Levinas's theory of subjectivity and his conceptualisation of the scene of teaching lead us to think again about the very nature of education and teaching, what and who education is 'for', and some challenges that follow from the way his thinking disturbs the intellectual closure represented by some instrumentalist frameworks of education. However, before explaining the context and purposes of my own analysis, let me say something briefly about the context of Levinas's philosophy and how this related to his own work within education.

### **Levinas: Philosopher, Teacher, Prophet**

It was as if, to use the language of tourists, I went to see Husserl and I found Heidegger. Of course, I will never forget Heidegger's relation to Hitler. Even if this relation was only of a very short duration, it will be forever. But the works of Heidegger, the way in which he practised phenomenology in *Being and Time* – I knew immediately that this was one of the greatest philosophers in history (RB, p. 32).

It was while studying at Strasbourg that Levinas read Husserl's *Logical Investigations* for the first time, an experience that gave him the sense of 'gaining access not to yet

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<sup>1</sup> For example Todd, 2003a, Biesta, 2006, Egéa-Kuehne, 2008

another speculative construction, but to a new possibility of thinking, to a new possibility of moving from one idea to another, different from deduction, induction, and dialectic, a new way of unfolding “concepts” (p. 31).<sup>2</sup> Inspired by this sense of a new direction in philosophy, Levinas went to Freiburg to study with Husserl himself in 1928-29, writing his thesis on Husserl’s theory of intuition. Yet the approach he had discovered in Husserl was, as he put it, ‘continued and transfigured by Heidegger’ (p. 32). While Levinas was credited with introducing Husserlian phenomenology into France through his doctoral thesis and translation of *Cartesian Meditations*, his criticisms of Husserl were informed by his engagement with Heidegger, and he came to critique his former teacher from a ‘historical’ perspective, for excessive theoreticism and ‘overlooking the existential density and historical embeddedness of lived experience’ (Critchley, 2002, p. 7). Clearly much inspired by Heidegger, Levinas describes his approach, towards the end of *Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, as ‘post-Husserlian’ (THP, p. 130). We see also here the beginnings of the distinctiveness of Levinas’s own later position in his reservations on Husserl, when he states that the reduction to an *ego* ‘can only be a first step towards phenomenology. We must also discover “others” and the intersubjective world’ (p. 150). Yet in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas will still describe his work as ‘in the spirit of Husserlian philosophy’, an approach he explains as follows:

Our presentation of notions proceeds neither by their logical decomposition, nor by their dialectical description. It remains faithful to intentional analysis, insofar as it signifies the locating of notions in the horizon of their appearing, a horizon unrecognized, forgotten or displaced in the exhibition of an object, in its notion, in the look absorbed by the notion alone. (OB, p. 183)

Thus while he departs from Husserl, influenced by the Heideggerian emphasis that phenomenological analysis should begin in the facticity of the human in the situation of the everyday, he nevertheless retained a sense that his work is indebted to Husserl, though moving away from his former teacher to the extent that it is open to question whether Levinas’s own work can really be seen as remaining within phenomenology. If the intentionality thesis, which sees every mental phenomenon as directed towards

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<sup>2</sup> By placing this term in quotation marks, Levinas might be seen as alluding to the sense in which the place of conceptual thinking was particularly contested at this time, for example in Bergson’s critique of conceptual thinking, against which Levinas defends Husserl’s theory of the relation between concepts and intuition in *Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology* (THP, p. 119).

its object, is axiomatic within phenomenology, then, as Simon Critchley suggests, 'Levinas's big idea about the relation to the other person is not phenomenological, because the other is not given as a matter for thought or reflection ... Levinas maintains a methodological but not a substantive commitment to Husserlian phenomenology.' (Critchley, 2002, p. 8)

Husserl's phenomenological method was, Levinas argued, transformed by Heidegger. It was, he later stated, the brilliance of Heidegger's application of the phenomenological approach, rather than 'the last speculative consequences of his project' that remained with him (*RB*, p. 33). Levinas followed Heidegger in rejecting Husserl as too theoretical, removed from the everyday:

Husserl conceives philosophy as a universally valid science in the manner of geometry and the sciences of nature, as a science which is developed through the efforts of generations of scientists, each continuing the work of the others... *In this conception, philosophy seems as independent of the historical situation of man as any theory that tries to consider everything sub specie aeternitatis...* [The historical] structure of consciousness, which occupies a very important place in the thought of someone like Heidegger ... has not been studied by Husserl, at least in the works published so far. He never discusses the relation between the historicity of consciousness and its intentionality, its personality, its social character (*THP*, pp. 155-56).

In the concluding section of *Theory of Intuition*, we can see how far his critique of Husserl followed from his engagement with Heidegger: he describes Heidegger's phenomenological method as following Husserl, 'although in a profoundly original manner, and we feel justified in being inspired by him' (p. 155).

Levinas admired the way in which Heidegger's phenomenological ontology disrupted the primacy of consciousness in Husserl's approach. While Husserl's transcendental Ego analyses life from a transcendent, ahistorical position, Heidegger's analysis saw Being and beings as always already engaged in time and history, without, as Colin Davis suggests, 'recourse to the absolute self-liberation promised by phenomenological reduction' (Davis, 1996, p. 15). It was from this engagement always already within time and history that meaning takes place. Thus Levinas contrasts their positions:

In Husserl, the phenomenon of meaning has never been determined by history. Time and consciousness remain in the final analysis the 'passive synthesis' of an inner, deep constitution that is no longer a being. For Heidegger, on the contrary, meaning is conditioned by something that already was. The intimate link between meaning and thought results from the accomplishment of meaning in history, that something extra that is one's existence. The introduction of history at the foundation of mental life undermines clarity and constitution as the mind's authentic modes of existence. Self-evidence is no longer the fundamental mode of intellection. (DEH, p. 87)

This idea of meaning as determined 'by something that already was', which for Levinas will be linked to the trace of an immemorial past, becomes fundamental to the conception of language and subjectivity developed in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being*.

Levinas's fascination with Heidegger was brought to an abrupt end by his teacher's political commitment to National Socialism, accepting the position of Rector of Freiburg University in 1933. It is necessary to emphasise that it was precisely because of the extent to which Levinas had been attracted to Heidegger<sup>3</sup> that, following on from this, it is possible to see the rest of his philosophical work as an attempt to think through 'the question of how a philosopher as undeniably brilliant as Heidegger could have become a Nazi, for however short a time' (Critchley, 2002, p. 8). When asked how he accounted for Heidegger's commitment to National Socialism, Levinas appears at a loss to be able to give an explanation, answering:

I don't know; it's the blackest of my thoughts about Heidegger and no forgetting is possible. Maybe Heidegger had the feeling of a world that was decomposing, but he believed in Hitler for a moment in any case. How is this possible? To read Löwith's memoirs, it was a long moment. (RB, p. 36)

Therefore, although Levinas's work was inspired by the brilliance of Heidegger, Heidegger's involvement with Hitlerism must be seen as equally determinative for the future direction that Levinas's work took, governed by what he expressed in *Existence and Existents* as 'the profound desire to leave the climate of that philosophy, and by a conviction that we cannot leave it for a philosophy that would be pre-Heideggerian'

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<sup>3</sup> Between 1930 and 1932 Levinas had been planning to write a book on Heidegger, which was abandoned in response to Heidegger's actions in 1933 (cf. Critchley, 2002, p. 8).

(*EE*, p. 4). It was, as Howard Caygill notes in *Levinas and the Political*, the experience of National Socialism, both feared and mourned, which was to determine the course of Levinas's subsequent philosophical reflection (Caygill, 2002, p. 5). Levinas describes his life in the autobiographical sketch in *Difficult Freedom* as a 'disparate inventory ... dominated by the presentiment and memory of the Nazi horror' (*DF*, p. 291), and *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* should be seen, as Caygill suggests, as philosophical works of mourning, testified to in the dedication of *Otherwise than Being*, in 'memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism'.<sup>4</sup>

This sense of the urgency of leaving 'the climate of [Heidegger's] philosophy' is evident in Levinas's presentiments as well as his mourning of the Nazi horror, and we can see this departure from Heidegger developing throughout Levinas's writings after 1933. In *On Escape*, Levinas's first original thematic essay of 1935, we see his initial attempt at distancing himself from Heideggerian ontology. Here the relation to Being, and by implication to Heidegger's ontology, is seen as oppressive, a restrictive bond with the I chained to itself. In this text, we see Levinas's 'presentiment' of the political horror that was shortly to follow, in his damning comment evoking Heidegger that 'Every civilization that accepts being – with the tragic despair it contains and the crimes it justifies – merits the name "barbarian"' (*OE*, p. 73). This same prescience is also evident in the article 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism', published in the Catholic Journal *Esprit* in 1934. Although Heidegger is not mentioned by name, in the preface Levinas wrote when the article was translated into English in 1990, Heideggerian ontology is explicitly seen as allowing National Socialism to occur. Levinas states that the article arose:

from the conviction that the source of the bloody barbarism of National Socialism lies not in some contingent anomaly within human reasoning, nor in some accidental ideological misunderstanding. This article

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<sup>4</sup> This included most members of his family, who were shot by the Nazis during the pogroms beginning in June 1940, with the collaboration of Lithuanian nationalists. The names of the members of his family who were murdered are included in the dedication of *Otherwise than Being*. Levinas's wife and daughter were protected during the war through the bravery of several French friends, including Maurice Blanchot (cf. Malka, 2006, pp. 64-82 for details of this period of his life).



expresses the conviction that this source stems from the essential possibility of *elemental Evil* into which we can be led by logic and against which Western philosophy had not sufficiently insured itself. This possibility is inscribed within the ontology of a being concerned with being – a being, to use the Heideggerian expression, ‘dem es in seinem Sein um dieses Sein selbst geht’. (RPH, p. 63)

This theme, that the self-positing, autarchic subject, a being concerned with being, ‘the famous subject of a transcendental idealism that before all else wishes to be free and thinks itself free’ (ibid.), leads to the possibility of ‘bloody barbarism’ is the kernel of much of what Levinas will later say. It is notable here that Levinas also criticises liberalism as insufficient for protecting the dignity of the human subject, because it likewise depends on a self-positing, autonomous subject. He questions:

We must ask ourselves if liberalism is all we need to achieve an authentic dignity for the human subject. Does the subject arrive at the human condition prior to assuming responsibility for the other man in the act of election that raises him up to this height? This election comes from a god – or God – who beholds him in the *face* of the other man, his neighbour, the original ‘site’ of the Revelation. (ibid.)

Thus we can see that already in 1934, Levinas’s approach to phenomenology and ontology is leaving the philosophical climate of Heidegger, a departure signalling that Levinas’s rejection of the philosophical primacy of ontology is always already political.

In *Existence and Existents*, published in 1947, the core sections of which were written while a prisoner in Stalag XIB as a forced labourer from 1940-45, Levinas begins to develop a philosophical course away from existence, towards the idea of the subject as for-the-other. Here Levinas introduces the notion of the *il y a*, the idea of pure unceasing being, ‘a monotony deprived of meaning’ (RB, p. 45). But following the descriptions of the horror of the *il y a*, Levinas describes the possibility of leaving this meaninglessness. What provides the possibility of exit, Levinas describes as:

obligation, in the ‘for-the-other,’ which introduces a meaning into the nonsense of the *there is*. The I subordinated to the other. In the ethical event, someone appears who is the subject par excellence. That is the kernel of all I would say later (pp. 45-6).

*Time and The Other*, a collection of four lectures delivered at the Philosophical College in Paris and published in 1948, represents the hope for a different approach to philosophy in the post-war period, focusing on alterity and the possibility of a relation of non-reciprocity with the other. It can be seen as signalling a link between Levinas's early phenomenological texts and the first of his two most significant texts: *Totality and Infinity*. Hand describes this transitional sense of *Time and The Other* clearly:

It retains from his early phenomenology the fundamentally moral nature of singularity, and brings this now resolutely into a vision of the future that escapes the finite concepts of freedom, forceful inquiry and mastery. Henceforth, the intellectual tendency towards totality will be resisted by the ethical recognition of infinity. It is this fundamental re-founding of phenomenology that Levinas's first major work of philosophy ... will now work to confirm. (Hand, 2009, p. 34)

The first of Levinas's two major philosophical texts, what Derrida calls 'the great work', was *Totality and Infinity*, published in 1961. The emphasis that most commentators place on the conjunction of the terms 'totality' and 'infinity' in the title is on the contrast between the totalising approach of ontology and the infinitude of the ethical relation. In this work, Levinas claims that if the relation to the other is conceived of in terms of comprehension, reciprocity, equality, recognition, or correlation, then that relation, so far as it brings that other within the sphere of *my* understanding, is totalising. Although Levinas appears to use the term 'totality' primarily to characterise the approach that he describes as dominating Western philosophy, there is a certain equivocation about the use of the term that allows it also to carry broader political resonances. Caygill draws attention to the wider political context of Levinas's use of this term:

the term 'totality' was sufficiently broad to hold both the specific political critique of the totalitarian political of National Socialism and the general philosophical critique of Western metaphysics. 'Totality' was at once the specific term identified by Victor Klemperer, the philologist of the language of the Third Reich as 'one of the keystones' of 'everyday Nazi discourse' as well as, and perhaps not coincidentally, one of the central concepts of modern philosophy, featuring significantly in the works of Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. (Caygill, 2002, p. 94)

We have seen how Levinas's texts prior to this had been concerned with a critique of Heideggerian ontology. In *Totality and Infinity*, this critique that began with Heidegger moves beyond him to the philosophical tradition that allowed his thinking to develop in this way and led to the totalitarianism of National Socialism. Given the influence of Heidegger's historicist approach to phenomenology, this is an appropriate way for Levinas to deepen his understanding of how the philosophical positions of his former teacher, which allowed 'political horror', emerged within a particular philosophical tradition of reflecting on the human subject. The totalising approach, towards which philosophy has tended, is disrupted by the approach of the Other<sup>5</sup>, addressing me and making me responsible in an ethical demand, prior to the totalising relation, leading to Levinas's famous claim that ethics is 'not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy' (*TI*, p. 304).

*Otherwise than Being*, Levinas's second major work, was published in 1974, although sections of it are based on lectures and articles from up to seven years prior to this. This text extends and deepens the presentation of the ethical subject in *Totality and Infinity*, with the sense of the infinite demand addressed to the subject intensified to the point of substitution, persecution and trauma. The difficult language of the text corresponds to the criticisms that Derrida raised against *Totality and Infinity* in 'Violence and Metaphysics' and primarily the question of whether Levinas's project of moving beyond ontology is doomed because he remains within the language of Heideggerian ontology, Hegel and Husserl (Derrida, 2001, p. 189 ff.). In an interview, Levinas himself sums this up: 'Derrida ... reproached me for my critique of Hegelianism by saying that in order to criticize Hegel, one begins to speak Hegel's language. That is the basis of his critique.' (Levinas, 1988, p. 179) The difficulty of the textual performance of *Otherwise than Being*, the dramatic presentation of the intensity of the infinite ethical demand by which subjectivity is constituted, is seen by many commentators as evidence of how seriously Levinas felt the need to respond to Derrida. Levinas himself later described how *Totality and Infinity* was an attempt at systematising certain modes of experience and knowledge, implying that Derrida's critique was justified:

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<sup>5</sup> A term used by Levinas in specific and provocative ways, as I will elaborate in Chapter 1.

The fundamental experience which objective experience itself presupposes is the experience of the Other... In *Totality and Infinity*, an attempt was made to systematize these experiences by opposing them to a philosophical thought which reduces the Other to the Same and the multiple to the totality, making of autonomy its supreme principle (*DF*, p. 294).

Levinas felt that he had moved beyond ontological language with *Otherwise than Being*, stating, 'The ontological language which *Totality and Infinity* still uses in order to exclude the purely psychological significance of the proposed analyses is henceforth avoided' (p. 295). The title, *Otherwise than Being* signifies the sense in which Levinas saw this book as moving beyond ontology to an ethical language that draws attention to the disturbance of being by sensibility towards the need and demand of my neighbour. I am a subject only as one primordially exposed to my neighbour who addresses me and looks for my response. My being addressed takes place in passivity, but in responding I am already responsible and unique in the response I alone can give to that particular address. Caygill draws attention to how it is possible to understand the language of this text as pointing in the direction of a 'prophetic politics'. 'Prophetic' here has the sense of an acknowledgement of and call towards the possibility of a mode of politics and ethical relation that is vigilant against the totalising operations of political ontology. To prophesy in such a way is not to theorise, according to Levinas, but to perceive and bear witness to an order prior to thematisation, revealed in *illeity*:

It is in prophecy that the Infinite escapes the objectification of thematization and of dialogue, and signifies as *illeity*, in the third person....

An obedience preceding the hearing of the order, the anachronism of inspiration or of prophecy is, for the recuperable time of reminiscence, more paradoxical than the prediction of the future by an oracle. 'Before they call, I will answer,' the formula is to be understood literally. But this singular obedience to the order to go, without understanding the order, this obedience prior to all representation, this allegiance before any oath, this responsibility prior to commitment, is precisely the other in the same, inspiration and prophecy, the *passing itself* of the Infinite (*OB*, p. 150).

These ideas of obedience and *illeity* have deep significance, as we will explore, for how we might understand responsibility, community and fraternity in education.

While developing the themes explored in these texts, Levinas was spending most of his professional life as a school administrator and teacher. He became Director of the École Normale Israélite Orientale in 1945<sup>6</sup>, and was to remain in this position until 1979.<sup>7</sup> The ENIO was a school established in Paris in 1867 by the Alliance Israélite Universelle, to train teachers to work in the Mediterranean, and Levinas describes the institution as working ‘for the emancipation of Jews in those countries where they still did not have the right to citizenship’ (*RB*, p. 38). The significance of this pedagogical and administrative work in the development of his philosophy is rarely alluded to by commentators. However, just as it is necessary to understand the context of the emergence of Levinas’s conceptualisation of ethics and politics against the background of his own experience of political horror, so it is likewise necessary to see his statements about the teaching relation, which are usually interpreted as philosophical descriptions in an abstract sense, against the background of most of his career spent working in education. His description of the address of the Other as the scene of teaching, while not an empirical description of the relation between student and teacher, must nevertheless be seen as informed by his experience of the demands of his role as a teacher, and the way in which, while working as a teacher, he was simultaneously a student, engaged, for example, in Talmudic studies with Monsieur Chouchani<sup>8</sup>. Therefore when Levinas states that ‘The pupil-teacher relationship ... contains all the riches of a meeting with the Messiah (*DF*, p. 85)’, this cannot be seen as divorced from his description of subjectivity emerging through a relationship in which I am taught, in *Totality and Infinity*.

Levinas described the importance of his demanding pedagogical and administrative work at the ENIO, and the way in which his work made the Jewish ordeal a pressing demand to confront, as follows:

Will my life have been spent between the incessant presentiment of Hitlerism and the Hitlerism that refuses itself to any forgetting? Not

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<sup>6</sup> In 1930, after arriving in Paris, he worked as a teacher at the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Paris, and in 1934, after performing his French military service, he became an administrative assistant in the education department of the Alliance. He was not able to apply for a teaching position in either a university or a lycée because he did not have the *Agrégation* in philosophy (details of this time are discussed in Malka, 2006, pp. 53-63).

<sup>7</sup> Although he delegated more of the administrative tasks once he became Professor of Philosophy at Nanterre in 1967.

<sup>8</sup> Monsieur Chouchani is the ‘master’ mentioned by Levinas in his Talmudic commentaries.

everything related in my thoughts to the destiny of Judaism, but my activity at the Alliance kept me in contact with the Jewish ordeal, bringing me back to the concrete social and political problems which concerned it everywhere. In Europe, outside of the Mediterranean region of the schools of the Alliance: notably in Poland, where the proximity of a hostile Germany nevertheless reanimated anti-Semitic instincts barely put to sleep. Concrete problems with spiritual repercussions. Facts that are always enormous. Thoughts coming back to ancient and venerable texts, always enigmatic, always disproportionate to the exegeses of a school. Here you have, in administrative and pedagogical problems, invitations to a deepening, to a becoming conscience, that is, to Scripture. (RB, p. 39)

This passage is striking in the way Levinas describes the teacher experiencing the concrete, practical demands of conscience in very similar language to his description of the condition of subjectivity as a deepening responsibility. The ‘ancient and venerable texts’, the Scripture, that Levinas refers is, in one sense, a reference to religious scriptures but in another sense must also be seen as metonymic for the demand of God that Levinas will describe as the infinitude of the ethical demand that comes to me from outside, ‘bringing me more than I contain’, and remaining beyond understanding. I will explore what this idea of ‘becoming conscience’ means in relation to the political subjectivity of teachers, but here it is worth emphasising that the scene of teaching that Levinas describes, while not an empirical description, is not some abstraction either and should be seen as relating to this context in which he was writing both *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, directing an educational institution, and this informs my interpretation of Levinas’s presentation of subjectivity. Having given this brief outline of the context of Levinas’s writing, let me say something about the orientation of this present work.

### **Levinas and the Infinite Demands of Education**

In his recent systematic treatment of the relationship between philosophy, ethics and politics, *Infinitely Demanding*, drawing on the work of Levinas, Alain Badiou and Knud Løgstrup, Simon Critchley argues that philosophy does not begin in the experience of wonder, but in the experience of disappointment, ‘the indeterminate but palpable sense that something desired has not been fulfilled, that a fantastic effort has failed’ (Critchley, 2007, p.1). While I am not sure that *all* philosophy begins in the experience of disappointment, I do think that much educational philosophy arises

from the sense that there is something lacking in current educational practices and ideologies. I would locate my work as arising from my own frustrations with the limitations of educational frameworks that I have encountered through my experience as a schoolteacher. The context of the pedagogical demands that Levinas speaks of, in particular the pressing sense of the Jewish ordeal, is clearly different from the current situation of British schoolteachers. However, this project is driven by the sense that reading Levinas's description of the nature of teaching and subjectivity brings to light limitations of an educational thinking currently dominated by neoliberal educational policies that have led to the excessive prominence of forces of economic managerialism and marketisation policies in schools in Britain and elsewhere, and reveals how such policies distort the way we think about the meaning of education itself. Although such policies have been criticised by other educational theorists, it is my contention that a reading of the meaning of education influenced by Levinas's presentation of subjectivity and Badiou's critique of late capitalism adds a distinctive interruption that is otherwise lacking in the debate.

Critiques of these dominant policies have tended to come from those working within radical pedagogy, influenced by Marxism and the post-Marxist approaches of Critical Theory, or from those working within the politics of identity, from communitarian approaches, or from liberal humanist traditions. As I will explore through Badiou's critique of these traditions, there can be a tendency in these approaches likewise either to treat education in an instrumentalist sense, as the means to create a more just society, or to be too particularist in focusing on ameliorating the conditions of certain groups in society. Such critiques are thus unable to provide sufficient resistance against the way in which thinking about education can be distorted by instrumentalist discourses. Whilst obviously there is a sense in which schooling should aim to create a fairer society, and where there are specific injustices against particular groups, these must of course be resisted, but what is needed is space to think about the meaning of education in a way that does not treat it solely as the means to specific ends. Reading Levinas, together with the challenge offered by Badiou, opens up for us a way of thinking about what it means to be taught that resists the tendency to harness education to ideals of productivity and service delivery. Levinas also offers a way to think through the meaning of ethics, community, knowledge, language, justice and

politics, all of which are of deep resonance for reflecting on the nature of education itself and how this relates to practices within educational institutions.

Critchley argues that there is a motivational deficit at the heart of contemporary liberal democracy, which can lead to either passive nihilism, attempting to retreat from reality in mysticism, contemplation and 'European Buddhism', or active nihilism, attempting to destroy the current order of things, exemplified, he argues, in the actions of Al-Qaeda and other forms of revolutionary vanguardism. This, Critchley argues, leads to the necessity of developing an account of ethical subjectivity in response:

What is required ... is a conception of ethics that begins by accepting the motivational deficit in the institutions of liberal democracy, but without embracing either passive or active nihilism ... What is lacking at the present time of massive political disappointment is a motivating and empowering conception of ethics that can face and face down the drift of the present, an ethics that is able to respond to and resist the political situation in which we find ourselves ... [I]f we are going to stand a chance of constructing an ethics that empowers subjects to political action, a motivating ethics, we require some sort of answer to what I see as the basic question of morality .... My polemical contention is that without a plausible account of motivational force, that is, without a conception of the ethical subject, moral reflection is reduced to the empty manipulation of the standard justificatory frameworks: deontology, utilitarianism and virtue ethics. (Critchley, 2007, pp. 8-9)

Whilst I am less willing than Critchley to condemn the institutions of liberal democracy, I agree that what is vital in attempting to resist and respond to disappointment with current educational theories is an account of ethics that 'empowers subjects to political action, a motivating ethics', and this, I will argue, must be related to an account of the meaning of education itself, and is opened up for us by Levinas.

Situating my work firmly within the field of philosophy of education, my aim throughout is to demystify the elements of Levinas's philosophy that have seemed opaque, obtuse and difficult to educational theorists. Sections of this thesis have been adapted for articles I have written for journals within philosophy of education and also within theology and religious studies, demonstrating the relevance of my reading of Levinas not just for educational theory, but also for these subject disciplines.



These are listed in the appendix. My work draws on educational theorists who have responded to Levinas's writing, but is distinctive in developing an extended reading of Levinas's articulation of the scene of teaching and the nature of language and subjectivity in relation to education in his two major works: *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. An understanding of language, as I have emphasised, must be seen as going all the way down, deep into the heart of the meaning of education itself, and this is something that has so far been insufficiently explored in relation to Levinas's significance for education. The social and political climate of the late twentieth century has, as Diane Perpich comments, been 'marked deeply by a concern with diversity, otherness, and difference' and it is within this climate that Levinas's philosophy has risen to prominence (Perpich, 2008, p. 2). It is therefore not surprising that much writing on Levinas in relation to education, as in other disciplines, has been concerned with questions of multiculturalism, human rights, and social justice. In Chapter 2, through examining Badiou's critique of Levinas, I will consider some of the problems potentially raised by interpretations that treat the question of 'difference' in Levinas in relation to discourses of pluralism and multiculturalism. My aim here therefore is to take educational readings of Levinas in a different direction, beginning with an examination of the question of language. Levinas emphasises how language reveals the ethicality of the human subject:

Should language be thought uniquely as the communication of an idea or as information, and not also – and perhaps above all – as the fact of encountering the other as other, that is to say, already as response to him? Is not the first word *bonjour*? As simple as *bonjour*. *Bonjour* as benediction and my being available for the other man. It doesn't mean: what a beautiful day. Rather: I wish you peace, I wish you a good day, expression of one who worries for the other. It underlies all the rest of communication, underlies all discourse. (RB, p. 47)

Since the scene of teaching for Levinas takes place in discourse, it must underlie our understanding of the meaning of education. After examining the relation between teaching, language and subjectivity in the first two chapters, each of the following chapters provides a distinctive contribution to specific educational debates, whilst also extending the analysis of the first two chapters through thinking through the ways in which this reading of subjectivity relates to the concrete demands of educational practice. This relation to concrete demands is not, however, an 'application' of Levinas's thinking or an attempt to instrumentalise his philosophy in the service of

education. Sharon Todd eloquently articulates this difficulty in how to read Levinas with education, and suggests that what is required is a difficult learning in response to this reading:

In thinking the relation between education and Levinas's philosophy, it is not about grafting his concepts onto an already existing discourse or practice, but rather creating a self-critical response to his texts which admits – indeed welcomes – the impossibility of such transposition...

As opposed to casting his thoughts into iron-clad principles which provide answers to preestablished problems of teaching and learning, I think, rather, the point is to welcome his words through giving reception to his teaching. To open one's educational home to the teaching of Levinas means, however, to disturb it. (Todd, 2008, p. 182)

In my writing, I have attempted to read Levinas in the way that Todd suggests, not 'casting his thoughts into iron-clad principles', but a reading that follows Levinas's own suggestion that Talmudic texts 'expect of a reader freedom, invention and boldness' (*TR*, p. 5). Thus my reading has opened my own 'educational home', both within educational theory and the current political context of my work as a teacher, to the disturbance that follows from giving reception to Levinas's teaching. As a result of that disturbance, I am conscious of shifts of style as I move between Levinas's writings and educational theory, but these shifts of tone in my writing can be seen as reflective of the way in which Levinas's writing *is* in a very different register from, and interrupts, the dominant discourses within educational theory.

The first two chapters offer a reading of Levinas's description of the scene of teaching as this relates to the nature of subjectivity itself, in an attempt to articulate a response to the basic question of morality that underlies the possibility of education itself. I take as the starting point for my analysis in Chapter 1, the way in which Levinas describes teaching as the way in which language and meaning come to me from the Other, 'bringing me more than I contain'. Todd highlights the importance of this idea for his readers in the field of education:

What is truly extraordinary about his ethics, and consequently what is highly relevant for readers in the field of education, is that this ethical welcoming takes on the characteristics of a pedagogical relation. Levinas describes welcoming the Other as the self's capacity to learn from the Other as teacher. At the core of his philosophy, then, lies a theory of learning – one that is not so much concerned with how the subject learns

content, but with how the subject learns through a specific orientation to the Other. (Todd, 2008, p. 171)

In my reading, I draw particular attention to the way in which Levinas describes the relation between language, discourse, subjectivity and teaching. Of course, many educational theorists, from Dewey and Buber, to Oakeshott, Bahkthin and Freire, have emphasised the idea that the foundation of education is discourse. What I seek to show is the distinctiveness and provocation of Levinas's view of discourse as the relation with the Other, through which I become as a subject in response to an infinite demand. Furthermore, just as it is necessary to attend to the question of subjectivity in reflecting upon the nature of education, so I will argue, a theory of the subject necessitates reflection upon how that subject comes into being through its condition of being taught, a reflection often given insufficient attention in Levinasian scholarship.

In Chapter 2, I explore how Levinas deepens this understanding of ethical subjectivity in his second major work, *Otherwise than Being*. I consider in particular the infinitude of responsibility in Levinas's account, and the way in which I can only come into being through my condition of susceptibility to the need of the vulnerable neighbour who elects me as one uniquely responsible. In this chapter, I also consider the critique of Levinas by Badiou. The particular reason for confronting Levinas with the thought of Badiou is because he has criticised Levinas in a searching way from an overtly atheistic position. Hence, this is a means of testing the cogency of Levinas's thought and its dependence on a religious framework. Badiou's philosophical approach and tone can be seen to interrupt the somewhat obsessive quality of Levinas's writing, and therefore allow us to attend more closely to the distinctive elements of Levinas's presentation. It is my contention that reading Badiou *together* with Levinas can extend our thinking about the infinite demand that, for Levinas, is bound up with the emergence of subjectivity.

Whilst holding Levinas and Badiou together might seem an impossible task, there is nevertheless in both their philosophies the sense that the subject is constituted in passivity and sensibility, responding to a demand that comes from the outside and exceeds the self, disrupting any understanding of the autarchy or self-sufficiency of the subject. For both, education is the site of grace, and both the an-archy of the

subject in Levinas's thinking and the idea of political subjectivity in Badiou's conceptualisation emerge at a distance from the state, which is of significance for our understanding of educational practice. Badiou, like Levinas, worked as a teacher yet his understanding of education is not confined to the site of educational institutions. Given the incommensurabilities of Levinas's and Badiou's projects, it may seem somewhat perverse to attempt to bring these two thinkers together, and it would admittedly be more usual to place Levinas in conversation with Derrida, for example. My reason for preferring to read Levinas's understanding of subjectivity and teaching through the lens of Badiou's critique is precisely because Badiou works from such a different philosophical position.<sup>9</sup> The way that both he and Levinas lead us to see education as only possible through an excessive demand, which is nevertheless in some senses a grace, is the more striking *because* of their differences, and thus serves as a forceful interruption of instrumentalist notions of schooling and education.<sup>10</sup> In Levinas's Talmudic readings, there is a sense of the dynamic irresolutions of the plurivocal texts that he is approaching, a plurivocity that Levinas himself extends by introducing contemporary politics and philosophy in his own readings. My hope is that the disruptive effect of reading Levinas and Badiou together in this text might likewise point to an irresolution not just in my reading of Levinas in this thesis, but in the very processes of reading to which Levinas draws our attention.

Following on from this, in Chapter 3, I consider how this presentation of subjectivity extends and deepens our understanding of what has been seen as one of the principle aims of education: autonomy. In direct continuity with the emancipatory project of the Enlightenment, education has been seen as the site in which rationally autonomous, moral subjects are produced. Responding to Levinas's critique that the moral subject is, contra Kant, heteronomous rather than autonomous, I consider how it is possible to consider the meaning of autonomy as dependent on a prior condition of heteronomy, and how this leads to a richer conception of this principal aim of education. Chapter 4 then turns to consider how a further aim of education - the

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<sup>9</sup> A further reason for choosing not to explore Derrida's critique of Levinas is because this has been addressed by numerous other commentators, and I would contend that in *Otherwise than Being* Levinas largely addressed Derrida's concerns.

<sup>10</sup> The significance of Badiou for education is only beginning to be appreciated, for example there is a forthcoming (due 2009) special edition of *Educational Philosophy and Theory* on Badiou (in which a version of Chapter 4 will be published).

production of potential workers, with a portfolio of assessable and measurable skills - has become dominant within a neoliberal political context. For the majority of this chapter, I turn my attention away from Levinas to consider Badiou's challenge to such conceptualisations of education. The reason for such an extended focus on Badiou in this chapter is because he provides a very detailed analysis of the ways in which managerialism has become a predominant force within education in late capitalist societies, which is for historical reasons not a significant feature of Levinas's writing. Thus Badiou allows us to see more clearly how we might understand the current political context of our 'educational home' (Todd, 2008, p. 182) that is being opened to these disruptive teachings of both Levinas and Badiou. Through exploring Badiou's analysis, I consider how many of the standard critiques of economic managerialism in education remain within the current state of the situation. This helps us then to see how the understandings of education offered by both Badiou and Levinas offer us a richer vision of how we might think again about the possibilities of education beyond its distortion by policies of managerialism and marketisation.

Chapter 5 examines how the privileging of autonomy and performance explored in Chapters 3 and 4 have affected the subject discipline of Religious Education, and therefore offers an example of how Levinas's understanding of teaching might have practical consequences in the ways in which we come to understand the demands of the curriculum. Such attention could be given to any curricular discipline: my reason for focusing only on Religious Education arises from my own experience as a teacher of this subject and my desire to consider how the theoretical and practical frameworks of my subject discipline are affected by this reading of Levinas. Todd draws attention to the difficulty of any attempt to 'apply' Levinas to education:

To write ... about Levinas and education is to position oneself at an impossible threshold whose crossing seems to risk a betrayal of either Levinas's thought or education's interests ... It is not that the words of his texts are any more difficult than those of his contemporaries, or that his style, to use a quaint phallic phrase, is simply impenetrable, or even that he fails to write directly about education. Rather, it is that his self-described project of 'finding meaning' in ethics, coupled with his resistance to any programmatic effort to describe an ethics, do not lend themselves to education's interests in pursuing an ethic or in delineating direct answers to moral questions on teaching. (Todd, 2008, p. 170)

This is an important caveat to heed when considering the practical significance of Levinas for particular subject disciplines and I agree with Gert Biesta's emphasis that 'the very thing which does not follow from Levinas is a clear educational program which simply needs to be implemented by well-trained educators.' (Biesta, 2008, p. 207) Yet there clearly is a sense in which if we are affected by Levinas's description of the nature of subjectivity, this disturbs established practices and ways of thinking about education and opens up our thinking about how some practices might be otherwise. Through examining the place of Religious Education in British schools, I show how reading Levinas draws attention to what is lacking in the conceptualisation of religion at the heart of current frameworks, in a way that leads to the possibility of richer and more demanding approach to the subject.

Related to this understanding of religion, Chapter 6 shows how Levinas helps us to understand the possibilities for interfaith dialogue in education and opens up reflection on other practices of dialogue. Starting from the recent document on relations between the Abrahamic faiths, *A Common Word*, which marks a decisive shift in the possibilities for relation between these faiths, I explore how Levinas's presentation of the relation to the neighbour provides a provocative extension of the commandment to love the neighbour. Levinas's understanding of the relation to the neighbour extends how we might understand our responsibilities towards those of very different religious and political positions beyond the Abrahamic religions and leads to a provocative consideration of the meaning of community in education, predicated on vulnerability and illeity.

The final chapter arises from attempting to think through how I should understand the political significance of my profession as a teacher in the current context of political disappointment in which my work is situated, following on from the reading of subjectivity that has informed the preceding chapters. Focus on the political significance of Levinas's understanding of subjectivity has, arguably, been underplayed, in educational responses to his work. Biesta's *Beyond Learning: Education for a Democratic Future* is an exception to this. He argues, however, that schools cannot be seen as where democracy emerges: the responsibility for producing democratic citizens must be shifted away from schools and back to society at large

(Biesta, 2006, p. 144). I am more hopeful, however, than Biesta about the difference that schools might make to students (and teachers) as they emerge as political subjects. Biesta leads his reader to consider the challenge of Levinas at a rather abstract level, and the way in which he separates the need for democratic education from schools could, arguably, lead to a sense of conservatism among teachers, if they feel powerless to resist the political disappointments they experience in their work. My contention is that reading Levinas leads to a sense of the infinite demand of responsibility and the fact that my actions *do* have political consequences, even if the nature of that political space of my responsibility is often undecidable. As a teacher, I am always already responding to the demanding nature of my profession, and in a sense am constituted as a political subject through the 'becoming conscience' that Levinas speaks of, uncontained by the state, yet operating within the state. Such an understanding leads towards a new way of considering the political subjectivity of teachers, challenging prevailing assumptions that teachers currently lack political agency.

Just as Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* attempts to outline two ways of thinking the relation to the Other – the totalising and the ethical – so my aim throughout is to draw attention to how reading Levinas offers us a way of thinking through the meaning of education *otherwise* than the way it is currently harnessed to distorting instrumentalist ideologies that lie within the totalising approach Levinas rejects. I, like Levinas, cannot provide watertight proofs for this analysis, but my hope is that in writing about the possibility of an approach to education otherwise, our knowledge of the nature of education is deepened and transformed by Levinas's witness. Attending to Levinas might have the effect of an experience book, in the sense that Foucault describes his work as permitting 'a change, a transformation of the relationship we have with ourselves and with the world where, up to then, we had seen ourselves as being without problems – in short, a transformation of the relationship we have with our knowledge' (Foucault, 2000, p. 244). Reading Levinas deepens our sense of the potentialities and imperatives for justice and ethical relationality that in a sense are already implied within education. Although these tend to be covered over in discourses that place too much emphasis on the development of rational autonomy and preparing students for waged work, my aim is to recover and explore the sense

that education just *might* contain ‘all the riches of the meeting with the Messiah’ (*DF*, p. 85).



# Chapter 1

## **‘Bringing Me More Than I Contain’: Discourse, Subjectivity and the Scene of Teaching in *Totality and Infinity***

Let us begin our reading of the meaning and significance of education in Levinas’s philosophy with the question of language, for Levinas claims that it is through language, or more specifically, through discourse, that my ‘being is produced’:

My being is produced in producing itself before the others in discourse; it is what it reveals of itself to the others, but while participating in, attending its revelation. (*TI*, p.253)

If this is true, what does it mean for our understanding of the importance of discourse in education, and indeed for our understanding of the nature of education itself? The idea that discourse is fundamental to the trajectory of the individual’s ‘becoming’, and that this is in some sense what education is, appears relatively uncontroversial. Dewey writes: ‘all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative. To be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience’ (Dewey, 1966, p. 5). Martin Buber also suggests such an idea: ‘The relation in education is one of pure dialogue’ (Buber, 2002, p. 116). In what follows, I will explore Levinas’s presentation of discourse as teaching in *Totality and Infinity*, examining how subjectivity is produced through the revealing of myself to others in discourse as an ethical response.

My focus is *Totality and Infinity* because it is here that we find Levinas's clearest and most distinctive discussion of the nature of teaching. To say that the discussion is 'clear' is misleading, however. The language of *Totality and Infinity* is strange, enigmatic, attempting to draw attention to the impossibility of capturing the relation with the Other<sup>1</sup> in language. As Colin Davis writes:

Levinas's acute awareness of the pitfalls involved in overcoming ontology, in becoming Abraham boldly stepping out into the unknown rather than Ulysses seeking only what he had left behind, helps to explain the extraordinary difficulty of his writing. His texts are assertive and propositional, but also enigmatic, fragmented, paradoxical or perhaps just plain inconsistent. (Davis, 1996, p.35)

The difficulty of *Totality and Infinity* is, as Hand argues, an implicit element of his whole project, which aims to expose the ways in which the history of Western philosophy, down to the very language and methods it has employed, has involved a totalising suppression of the Other:

These ... claims are put forward in an almost prophetic or messianic way, rather than as stages in a logical argument. But Levinas embraces such an approach, as the way to break free from the process of offering philosophical evidence, and therefore to get back to an original relation with being that for him exists before and beyond totality and history. The danger is that such an approach, relying on terms like transcendence, infinity and revelation, could be dismissed as a purely spiritual rather than rational vision. Again, Levinas recognizes this possibility, but turns the tables by suggesting that the systems of totalization given by Western philosophy and history have merely tried and failed to contain the idea of infinity. (Hand, 2009, p. 37)

Despite this difficulty of reading and writing about Levinas, the challenge he presents to preconceptions about the nature of language and knowledge have significant implications for the meaning of education. I will here, therefore, attempt to delineate how Levinas presents teaching as the Other's offering of the world to me through speech, in contrast with more maieutic understandings of teaching, and how this challenges other conceptions of language in education.

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<sup>1</sup> The capitalised 'Other' is typically used to translate the French *l'autrui* as opposed to *l'autre*, and it indicates an absolute relation to the other person, independent of particular characteristics, of factors that might differentiate this person from that person. The usage is not entirely consistent.

Teaching is, for Levinas, the space of encounter with the Other in which subjectivity is revealed as ethical. In teaching, subjectivity is constituted through Desire and goodness, both encountered through language. 'Desire' for Levinas means desire for the absolutely Other, a metaphysical desire that can never be satisfied, as opposed to the kinds of desires we can satisfy, and denotes a movement outwards towards the absolutely Other, and the capitalisation of this term indicates this sense. This metaphysical Desire could be distinguished from 'desire' that aims to bring the Other into the field of the same, or aims at the synthesis of self and Other. Desire for Levinas must maintain the alterity of the Other as beyond possession. He outlines this sense of Desire in the 1964 essay 'Meaning and Sense':

The idea of the Infinite is Desire. It paradoxically consists in thinking more than what is thought and maintaining what is thought in this very excess relative to thought – in entering into a relationship with the ungraspable while guaranteeing its status of being ungraspable. (*BW*, p. 55)

In what follows, I will consider what is unique in Levinas's account of subjectivity as only possible through this relation with the ungraspable in which we are taught.

### **Discourse as Teaching**

Before examining Levinas's presentation of language in *Totality and Infinity*, let me briefly address the question of Levinas's philosophical approach in the text. I have already commented on the influence of Husserl and Heidegger, and in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes his approach as indebted to Husserl:

the presentation and development of the notions employed owe everything to the phenomenological method. Intentional analysis is the search for the concrete. Notions held under the direct gaze of the thought that defines them are nevertheless, unbeknown to this naïve thought, revealed to be implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought; these horizons endow them with a meaning – such is the essential teaching of Husserl. (*TI*, p. 28)

What matters in this approach is, however, not Husserl's thesis of intentionality but rather 'the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives. The break-up of the formal structure of thought (the noema of a noesis) into

events which this structure dissimulates ... constitutes a *deduction* – necessary and yet non-analytical’ (ibid.) Nevertheless, although the account of ethical subjectivity is presented in phenomenological terms, scholars have suggested different ways of reading Levinas. Robert Bernasconi, for example, has suggested that it is possible to read Levinas both transcendently and empirically, but that neither reading is sufficient (Bernasconi, 1989). Levinas describes his own philosophy, in his 1965 essay ‘Énigme et phénomène,’ as a philosophy of darkness (darkness being an allusion to the idea of light in phenomenology). This helps us to understand his ‘method’: while adopting the Husserlian phenomenological method, Levinas at the same time departs from intentional analysis by drawing attention to what lies beyond the phenomenon, opaque to consciousness itself. Levinas is operating outside of either descriptive or normative ethics, and his statement that ‘ethics is an optics’ (*TI*, p. 23) reveals the sense of ethics as what enables things to be brought to light in the phenomenological sense, while disturbing the field of consciousness itself. Levinas points to an *ethical* phenomenology, demonstrating the ethical as beyond and yet revealed by the phenomenon. This, then, is the philosophical ‘framework’ within which I take *Totality and Infinity* to be operating.

Levinas’s philosophy has been seen as underpinned by one far-reaching theme: that ethics is first philosophy. It is in *Totality and Infinity* that this idea is first articulated at length. Levinas uses the term ‘ethics’ not in a traditional sense as a code of morality or moral decision-making, or meta-ethical examination.<sup>2</sup> It is rather a relation of responsibility to the Other, which, Levinas argues, Western philosophy has sought to suppress through bringing the Other into the order of the Same. In *Totality and Infinity*, the linguistic order is the site of totality but *also* the site of infinity, or ethics. Levinas states that ‘the essence of language is goodness... the essence of language is friendship and hospitality’ (*TI*, p. 305): having language depends, as we will see, on the precondition of having responded in peace to the demand that the Other addresses to me. The use of language, however, may be totalising, bringing the Other within the totality of the Same, for example: ‘Thematization and conceptualization, which moreover are inseparable, are not peace with the other but suppression or possession of the other’ (p. 46). In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas seeks

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<sup>2</sup> Diane Perpich provides an excellent discussion of the relation between Levinas’s ethics and more traditional ethical enterprises in *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Perpich, 2008).

to show that the essence of language is interpellation, the Other's addressing me and my response. As thought is conditioned by language, the very structure of logical thought is anchored by the relation to the Other.

For Levinas, language presupposes a relation to the Other, who remains transcendent to the same. In Part I of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas states that one of the aims of his work is to demonstrate that the relation with alterity is language itself:

We shall try to show that the *relation* between the same and the other – upon which we seem to impose such extraordinary conditions – is language. For language accomplishes a relation such that the terms are not limited within this relation, such that the other, despite the relationship with the same, remains transcendent to the same. The relation between the same and the other, metaphysics, is primordially enacted as conversation, where the same, gathered up in its ipseity as an 'I', as a particular existent unique and autochthonous, leaves itself. (p. 39)

Levinas uses the terms 'conversation' and 'discourse' synonymously in *Totality and Infinity*. Conversation is a relation that maintains separation between self and Other, while at the same time allowing the Other a right over the egoism of the self. Through the approach of the Other, my spontaneity is limited: 'The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics.' (p. 43)

This Other has been suppressed, Levinas argues, by the history of Western philosophy, exemplified by the teaching of Socrates as maieutics. Socrates's teaching, Levinas suggests, means: 'to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me' (ibid.). In order to consider how Levinas's presentation of teaching is radically different from Socratic maieutics, it is worth considering what is meant by the Socratic method. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates claims that he is a midwife (*Theaetetus* 184b), who can deliver thoughts through his maieutic art. It is, as Kenneth Seeskin writes, 'the respondent, and by implication the reader, who gives birth to an idea. All Socrates does is facilitate the delivery' (Seeskin, 1987, p. 13). The method of this delivery is the *elenchos*: the process of cross-examination and testing of opinions to disperse the clouding of the mind by false opinions, produce uncertainty and thence the desire to know. The metaphor of Socrates as midwife would see the unsettling effects of the *elenchos*, through which what we thought we knew is challenged through the process

of testing, as the birth pangs. But Socrates is a barren midwife; the Socratic dialogue is not an insemination, but rather bringing to birth what is innate within the individual. Thus Socrates insists: 'You ask me if I teach you when I say there is no teaching but recollection' (*Meno* 82). For Socrates, then, knowledge and understanding are not imparted from without, but are seen as 'in' the soul of the individual.<sup>3</sup>

Levinas is radically opposed to the Socratic idea of pedagogy as maieutics. For Levinas, language, knowledge and meaning are predicated on the relationship with the Other. To be taught means to encounter what is wholly other, which is precisely opposite to maieutics:

To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching [*enseignement*]. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain. In its non-violent transitivity the very epiphany of the face is produced (*TI*, p. 51).

To be taught is to have been summoned into a non-violent relation with the Other, who is always in a position of magisterial height. The radical openness of this encounter is, Levinas suggests, the opposite of Socratic pedagogy. It is through this approach of the Other that I am called into question, and my subjectivity is only possible through the condition of being taught:

The height from which language comes we designate with the term teaching. Socratic maieutics prevailed over a pedagogy that introduced ideas into a mind by violating or seducing (which amounts to the same thing) that mind. It does not preclude the openness of the very dimension of infinity, which is height, in the face of the Master. This voice coming from another shore teaches transcendence itself. Teaching signifies the whole infinity of exteriority. And the whole infinity of exteriority is not

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<sup>3</sup> It would be interesting to explore further the ways in which Plato's Good Beyond Being, as acknowledged by Levinas, allows for alterity, or whether the Other is still subsumed in the self in our relation to the Good. Levinas suggests that the notion of desire presented in Diotima's speech in the *Symposium* is a form of incest, while at the same time pointing out that Plato presents discourse as discourse with God in the *Phaedrus* and thus suggesting that 'metaphysics is the essence of language with God; it leads above being.' (*TI*, p. 297). The relationship between self, Other and teaching for Plato is more complex than the simple rejection of maieutics implies.

first produced then to teach: teaching is its very production. The first teaching teaches this very height, tantamount to its exteriority, the ethical. (TI, p. 171)

As Robert Gibbs suggests, the social image that Levinas prefers to signify the relation between self and Other is that of a teacher. The height of the teacher 'signals the resistance without power, a command that can compel only pacifically' (Gibbs, 1995, p. 15). Levinas emphasises that the Other is my master, in a mastery 'that does not conquer, but teaches. Teaching is not a species of a genus called domination, a hegemony at work within a totality, but is the presence of infinity breaking the closed circle of totality' (TI, p. 171).

If this encounter with the Other is a teaching that interrupts 'the closed circle of totality', *how* are we taught through this relation? In an essay entitled 'Dialogue', Levinas emphasises that discourse is the Other's call to me, and my response to them: 'Is not the very opening of the dialogue already a way for the I to uncover itself, to deliver itself, a way for the *I* to place itself at the disposition of the *You*?' (GM, p. 149). Only in the opening of language, in which I am placed at the disposition of you, can I be taught what I could not have discovered within myself. This is, as Levinas emphasises, similar to Descartes's meditation on the idea of infinity coming to him from outside himself. For Levinas, in the approach of the Other, meaning and truth are produced from beyond myself, and in this way a common world is created between self and Other: 'To speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces. Language does not refer to the generality of concepts, but lays the foundation for a possession in common' (TI, p. 76). As Davis writes, 'through discourse I find that I am not the exclusive possessor of the world. What had seemed uniquely mine is revealed as shared with the Other' (Davis, 1996, p. 47). Through discourse, the world and things are placed in the space between me and the Other and their possession is put into question, as they are offered to me and I offer them to the Other. Speech itself is therefore a teaching in its founding of the world and community:

As an attendance of being at its own presence, speech is a teaching. Teaching does not simply transmit an abstract and general content already common to me and the Other. It does not merely assume an after all subsidiary function of being midwife to a mind already pregnant with its fruit. Speech first

founds community by *giving*, by presenting the phenomenon as given; and it gives by thematizing. (TI, p. 98)

The etymology of 'thematizing', from *tithēmi*, implies placing/setting. Here the placing refers to placing what is offered in speech before the self, the Other setting it in the space before me, *giving* me the phenomenon, or to use Levinas's phrase, 'presenting the phenomenon as given.' The term 'given' here has the force of 'gift' rather than a flat geometric 'given' and is an intrinsic aspect of Levinas's phenomenology, moving beyond Husserl by emphasising that the Other *cannot* be seen as phenomenological, since he is not *given* as something one can think about. As Critchley writes, 'the other is not a phenomenon but an enigma, something ultimately refractory to intentionality and opaque to understanding' (Critchley, 2002, p. 8). But in speech, the phenomenon *is* given. Thus the Other, who speaks to me and sets the phenomenon in my world remains outside my knowing, beyond any phenomenon.

This idea of being taught should not be taken in a straightforwardly developmental sense, as the development of consciousness; it is rather a description of the conditions of consciousness and subjectivity. However, thinking about how a child might develop language helps us to think further about what this notion of the phenomenon as a gift means. Let us imagine, for example, a small child being given a bowl of raspberries by her mother. The child's consciousness of the fruit and its meaning are invested through the actions and address of her mother, her mother looking for the child's response to her action (in perhaps accepting the fruit). Thus it is the mother who 'gives' the child 'raspberries', in the sense that the fruit is thematised, set in place in the world for the child by the mother, *given* a meaning and a context. By placing inverted commas around the terms 'gives' and 'raspberries', I am trying to suggest that the terms are being used here in a particular way. What is significant is not the idea that the child learns the word 'raspberry', or the concept 'raspberry' through the mother's actions, but rather that through the 'giving', through the mother's actions in addressing the child and looking for her response, raspberries can appear as raspberries in her world, or, in other words, the phenomenon of raspberries comes to the child. The child may be only at an early stage in developing language, but as the mother looks for the child's response to her offering, the child is already subjected to the address of the Other with which subjectivity begins. We can easily



see why this kind of interaction is a 'teaching', and why it is opposed to Socratic maieutics, since the phenomenon comes to the child from beyond herself, and it is this structure of the Other's offering me phenomena, and my receiving them, which is for Levinas fundamental to all consciousness, subjectivity and objectivity.

Although we are taught by the Other in the encounter, the teacher remains outside of my knowing: 'The master, the coinciding of the teaching and the teacher, is not in turn a fact among others. The present of the manifestation of the master who teaches overcomes the anarchy of facts' (*TI*, pp. 69-70). It is phenomena, not the Other, that are thematised; the infinite cannot be a theme 'but signals itself... as thematizing, as him starting from *whom* everything can be fixed in its identity' (*ibid.*). This teaching founds objectivity:

Teaching, the end of equivocation or confusion, is a thematization of phenomena. It is because phenomena have been taught to me by one who presents himself – by reviving the acts of this thematization which are the signs – by speaking – that henceforth I am not the plaything of a mystification, but consider objects. The presence of the Other dispels the anarchic sorcery of the facts: the world becomes an object. (*TI*, p. 99)

Objectivity is the result of putting things in question between self and Other, the offering of the world by the Other and speaking about the world 'with someone who has broken through the screen of phenomena and has associated me with himself' (*ibid.*). This is the precondition for reason. Difference and separation are then necessary conditions for reason, rather than reason being the overcoming of difference. Jeffery Dudiak, in *The Intrigue of Ethics*, suggests how the offering of the word by the Other establishes rational thought:

Objectivity, or the truth of objects..., the very rationality of the *logos*, ... rests upon a reference to the other who, while himself withdrawing from the realm of 'objective facts' that he offers or that I offer to him, would produce the objectivity of things that enter into commerce between us, and this by means of his status as teacher. (Dudiak, 2001, pp. 121-22)

For Levinas, objectivity, reason and truth are predicated upon the relation with the Other: the condition for language is a relation with what is beyond language. Reason, it should be emphasised, is therefore a significant aspect of this notion of language. In *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, Alphonso Lingis, who

translated several of Levinas's major works including *Totality and Infinity*, expresses how this idea of responsibility is intimately bound up with reasoning:

The other turns to me and speaks; he or she asks something of me. Her words, which I understand because they are the words of my own tongue, ask for information and indications. They ask for a response that will be responsible, will give reasons for its reasons and will be a commitment to answer for what it answers. But they first greet me with an appeal for responsiveness. (Lingis, 1994, pp.130-31)

For Levinas likewise, the exercise of rationality is always intimately bound up with the ethical conditions of responsibility that makes its exercise possible.

When language is viewed primarily as communication, as it often is in common usage<sup>4</sup> and in some conceptions of English teaching, the ethical preconditions of language can be hidden:

The 'communication' of ideas, the reciprocity of language, already hide the profound essence of language. It resides in the irreversibility of the relation between me and the other, in the Mastery of the Master coinciding with his position as other and as exterior. For language can be spoken only if the interlocutor is the commencement of his discourse, if, consequently, he remains beyond the system, if he is not *on the same plane* as myself. (TI, p. 101)

Levinas here suggests that the idea of language as communication, implying a transparency of ideas and reciprocity and reversibility of relation, misses the alterity of the Other which is the foundation of language. Reversibility and reciprocity would imply that I and Other are on the same plane, equals in a symmetrical relationship, thus failing to recognise that I am responsible to the Other's address in an asymmetrical responsibility. This idea that the relation between I and Other cannot be seen as reciprocal is fundamental to Levinas's argument, since if I posit the Other as another I, I minimise their alterity and presume to know them as one like me.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> Heidegger, for example, in 'Language' suggests that language is commonly viewed as a means of communication primarily: 'The current view declares that speech is the activation of the organs for sounding and hearing. Speech is the audible expression and communication of human feelings.' (Heidegger, 2001, p. 190)

<sup>5</sup> This notion of non-reciprocity in Levinas has been criticised, for example Derrida suggests that this must depend on a metaphysical symmetry of asymmetrical responsibility (Derrida, 2001, p. 160). We will explore how Levinas takes up this theme of the irreversibility of relation in *Otherwise than Being* in the following chapter.

speaking of language depends on its commencement by one who is outside language and beyond my knowing, for whom I have responsibility, and thus he is, in this sense my Master, calling me to responsibility from his position of vulnerability.

This should not be understood as an authoritarianism of the other person who stands outside language and commands me. It conveys more the idea that language comes from an alterity that is rooted in the vulnerability of other persons to my responses, refractory to intentionality and lying beyond understanding. This emphasis that language is the site of my ethical subjectivity and that to receive language is to be taught, is very different from the common emphasis on the communicative function of language in teaching. While not wishing to deny the importance of communication within schooling, pedagogic theories that over-emphasise the communicative function of language can lead us to miss the ethical conditions of language, and the alterity of the Other who brings me language. For Levinas, if we are to talk about communication at all, then this notion of what is communicated must be seen as inextricably bound up with that which cannot be communicated: the Other.

Whilst opposing the view that language is primarily communication, Levinas's understanding of language also leads us to reflect upon ways that other philosophies of language can miss the ethical condition of language, for example the views of structuralism or Heidegger.<sup>6</sup> Let us pause to consider these alternative approaches and how Levinas's understanding is distinct from these. Levinas takes many ideas from structuralist linguistics but diverges at significant points. Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* was the catalyst for the cluster of ideas known as structuralism, in which language is presented as a system, or a structure. For Saussure, language is a system of signs, each sign composed of two parts: a signifier (*signifiant*), which is a word or sound-pattern, and a signified concept (*signifié*). The signifier itself is arbitrary and has no intrinsic relation to the signified, yet because our thought is structured by language, we cannot separate the phonetic and conceptual aspects of language: they are as closely linked for us as two sides of a sheet of paper. In the human sciences, one of the most significant uses of the

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<sup>6</sup> I focus on the contrast with these two approaches to language particularly, rather than a Lacanian approach, for example, because they appear to have influenced Levinas's own approach.

Saussurian model was to challenge the modernist emphasis on autonomy. John Llewelyn summarises this point clearly:

because in structuralist semiotics the components or terms owe their meaning to their internal interrelations, it is arguable that there is only one unit, the system as a whole. This suggests an analogy with mathematical systems, where it is arguable that the mathematician reads off from the system as a whole the theorems he calculates or infers. One might say that it is the system that thinks through the mathematician. And something like this is what is said by some of the human scientists who apply Saussure's model to their own special fields. With some structuralists the idea that 'it' (*es, ça*) thinks in me turns into the idea of 'the death of man,' so that it becomes debatable whether they can properly be called 'human' scientists. Lacan in psychoanalysis, Althusser in political theory, Lévi-Strauss in anthropology and Foucault in the genealogies of knowledge and power are among those whom Levinas would see as representatives of 'modern antihumanism'. (Llewelyn, 2002, pp. 120-21)

The relationship between language and autonomy for Levinas is distinct from such 'antihumanist' models in which the free human is subsumed within systems and structures of language, knowledge and power. But it is also clearly distinct from the emphasis on human autonomy in the use of language that we find in thinkers such as Locke, in his nomenclaturist philosophy of language. For Levinas, because all experience and cognition come from the relation with the absolutely Other, I cannot have autonomy in the Lockean sense, yet neither am I subsumed by the system of language as I am in the structuralist opposition to autonomy. Levinas's view that we are heteronomous subjects implies a singularity of the I: although language and understanding are brought to me by the Other, *my* responses are an integral aspect of the appearance of my world within my horizons. There is thus a confirmation of the self as unique in the way it *alone* can respond to the appeal of the Other's address, but this is neither the autonomy of the Lockean subject, nor its antithesis in structuralism. Response, responsibility and signification are therefore intimately related for Levinas, as he explains in an interview conducted in 1986 and subsequently published in *The Provocation of Levinas*:

the beginning of all language is in the face. In ... its silence, it calls you. Your reaction to the face is a response. Not just a response, but a responsibility. These two words [*réponse, responsabilité*] are closely related. Language does not begin with the signs that one gives, with

words. Language is above all the fact of being addressed. (Levinas, 1988, pp. 169-70)

Thus we can see that although Levinas takes from structuralism the use of the words *signifiant* and *signifié*, his emphasis is very different. As Llewelyn points out, Levinas uses the term *signifiant* not to refer to the phonetic or graphic signifier, but to the speaker who issues the signs, who looks for my response and thus elects me as responsible. Thus in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes:

The way the object is posited as a theme offered envelops the instance of signifying – not the referring of the thinker who fixes it to what is signified (and is part of the same system), but *the manifesting of the signifier, the issuer of the sign*, an absolute alterity which nonetheless speaks to him and thereby thematizes, that is, proposes a world. (*TI*, p. 96, emphasis mine)

The signifier is here the Other, not signified by the sign. It is precisely in the moment of signifying that the alterity of the Other is revealed: ‘The Other, the signifier, manifests himself in speech by speaking of the world and not of himself; he manifests himself by proposing the world, by *thematizing* it’ (*ibid.*).

Meaning is therefore dependent on the interpellation of the Other who signifies, an idea absent from the structuralist emphasis on meaning as determined through the differences between interdependent terms within the system of language. For Levinas, meaning is part of a system of different terms as in structuralism, but this system arises through speech, or, to be more specific (since structuralists might agree that language and speaking go together), the Other’s speaking to me: ‘Speech is thus the origin of all signification – of tools and all human works – for through it the referential system from which every signification arises receives the very principle of its functioning, its key’ (*TI*, p. 98). It is only through the revelation of the Other that the world can be oriented and take on signification. The address of the Other is the absolute upon which all meaning depends and the site of meaning is also the site of teaching, for to receive a meaning is to be taught: ‘To have meaning is to be situated relative to an absolute, that is, to come from that alterity that is not absorbed in its being perceived... To have meaning is to teach or to be taught, to speak or to be able to be stated’ (p. 97).

There is a further parallel between Levinas and structuralism here, in Levinas's suggestion that all thought, and hence our sense of reality, is always already structured by language, for example, in 'Meaning and Sense': 'Everything remains in a language or in a world, for the structure of the world resembles the order of language' (*BW*, p. 38). As Llewelyn points out, the use of this idea in structuralism led to 'the death of man', in terms of the end of the notion of a completely autonomous and free human who is author of his acts. Although sharing this emphasis that language is given to the self from outside, for Levinas the language that I speak is a gift to me from the Other, and in the approach of the Other, I am called to a position of ethical subjectivity, and this leads to a new sense of autonomy, as I will explore in Chapter 3.

As we have seen there are both similarities and striking differences between Levinas's presentation of language and structuralist linguistics, so also with Heidegger's views of language. We see Levinas taking up Heidegger's phraseology and emphasis that to be human means to have language in 'Meaning and Sense': 'There never was a moment in which *meaning first came to birth out of a meaningless being*, outside of a historical position where language is spoken. And that is doubtless what was meant when we were taught that language is the house of being.' (*BW*, p. 38) We also hear echoes of Heidegger, when Levinas describes language as poetry: 'Language *qua* expression is, above all, the creative language of poetry' (p. 41). Heidegger's later essays on language state that poetry is language in its purest form, but we can see here there is a different emphasis from Levinas's statement that language *qua expression* is poetry, for Heidegger specifically states that, 'In its essence, language is neither expression nor an activity of man' (Heidegger, 2001, p. 194). Language, for Heidegger, revealed in its purest form as poetry, speaks itself: 'Language speaks [*Die Sprache spricht*]. Man speaks in that he responds to language. This responding is a hearing' (p. 207).

For Heidegger, poetry is the essence of language, and not merely verse. As pure language, it names, a naming that is not a designation: 'This naming does not hand out titles. It does not apply titles, but it calls into the word. The naming calls' (p. 196). The naming calls what is concealed to come to language as unconcealed, thus instituting Being. We can see this idea in *The Origin of the Work of Art*: 'Language,

by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates being *to* their being *from out of* their being' (p. 71). This bringing to Being through language also means a bringing to being as in some sense *beyond* speaking, as unsayable: 'Projective saying is poetry... Projective saying is saying which, in preparing the unsayable, simultaneously brings the unsayable *as such* into a world' (ibid). This is why poetry is language in its purest form, showing the unsayable *as such*, revealing it to be *other* than the word, in a sense beyond language even while being brought to presence *as hidden* by language.

This idea of the unsayable being brought to presence as unsayable through language has resonances with Levinas's writing. Levinas states that 'The signified is never a complete presence; always a sign in its turn, it does not come in a straightforward frankness' (TI, p. 96). However, there is a different emphasis on the unsayable for Levinas, whose concern is to show that the signifier, the Other, the one who addresses me is beyond language, as the forever inaccessible origin of language. This we can see clearly in 'Meaning and Sense':

The Other (*Autrui*) who faces me is not included in the totality of being expressed. He arises behind every assembling of being as he to whom I express what I express. I find myself facing the Other (*Autrui*). He is neither a cultural signification nor a simple given. He is *sense* primordially, for he gives sense to expression itself, for it is only by him that a phenomenon as a meaning is, of itself, introduced into being. (BW, p. 52)

The term *sens* used in the statement that the Other is 'sense primordially' can be translated as both 'meaning' and 'direction'. The Other, while bringing me meaning, is also my direction. As I turn towards the Other who always escapes me, my world is unfolding and given new meanings: I am taught.

For Heidegger, the emphasis is less on the signifier lying beyond signification or expression than on the simultaneous absence and presence of the signified. While Heidegger challenges us to consider the nature of language as beyond conceptualisation, Levinas shows us how language is invested with meaning by the fact that it is spoken by one who is vulnerable to my response to that speaking. While Heidegger emphasises that it is language that speaks, for Levinas, this speaking is inextricably bound up with the offering of the word by the Other, the interpellation of

the Other. It is not that Levinas would disagree that language speaks in the Other or in me - indeed the idea of language as brought to me from outside, by the Other, implies that language does 'possess' me. But Levinas's emphasis on the Other speaking and founding my meanings and a common world of objects, shows the ethical nature of language in a way that is deliberately different from Heidegger's approach, motivated by the desire to leave the philosophical climate of his former teacher. Llewelyn summarises this difference between them thus:

Prior to my being possessed by language, Levinas maintains, is my possession by the human being who speaks to me.... For both Heidegger and Levinas [sociality] is linguistic, and a way of being possessed by language. But, to repeat, whereas for Heidegger possession by language is a way of *being with others*, for Levinas it is also a *possession by others*. This latter possession disrupts my being possessed by language as this is understood by Heidegger. (Llewelyn, 2002, p. 123)

Ultimately, Levinas's philosophy of language, like Heidegger's, suggests that language is the 'house of being', but for Levinas, this being depends on a prior orientation towards the Other who, in addressing me, founds my language, and this ethical orientation is not present in Heidegger's discussion of language. Even the use of the term 'house of being' by Heidegger emphasises this difference: in language, for Heidegger, I dwell poetically. For Levinas, my abode as a subject is a tent rather than a house, as I do not dwell but rather move towards the Other.

Although language begins with the approach of the Other, Levinas is careful to emphasise that we do not always relate to the Other in discourse. Rhetoric is the term Levinas uses for discourses that are not primarily relations with exteriority. Thus he points out that what we most often approach in conversation is not the Other, 'but an object or an infant, or a man of the multitude' (*TI*, p. 70). Rhetoric does still approach the Other, but is a corruption of discourse, as 'propaganda, flattery, diplomacy, etc.' (*ibid.*), and is a violence in its corruption of freedom. The tendency of rhetoric is totalising, unlike discourse as teaching, in which I am summoned to a position of infinite responsibility. This notion of infinite responsibility does not imply that we are always aware of such responsibility, but demonstrates the way in which intersubjective space is 'curved', and the sense of responsibility deepens the more we attend to it:



*The infinity of responsibility denotes not its actual immensity, but a responsibility increasing in the measure that it is assumed; duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished. The better I accomplish my duty the fewer rights I have; the more I am just the more guilty I am. (TI, p. 244)*

This responsibility is asymmetrical: ‘what I permit myself to demand of myself is not comparable with what I have the right to demand of the Other. This moral experience, so commonplace, indicates a metaphysical asymmetry’ (p. 53). I cannot demand responsibility from the other, and I cannot appeal to the neutral third term to demand that the Other take responsibility for me. Peace is my responsibility alone: ‘Peace must be my peace, in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other, in desire and Goodness, where the I both maintains itself and exists without egoism’ (p. 306). This does not mean that the Other will not take responsibility for me, but rather that when this does happen, this is an experience of grace.

As we have seen, the opening of language in *Totality and Infinity* is the Other’s address to me. Language, objectivity and truth are made possible by the Other’s teaching, ‘bringing me more than I contain’ and electing me as responsible. Thus Levinas’s philosophy demonstrates the primacy of the ethical conditions of language before its communicative function. What does this mean, then, for our understanding of what it is to be a subject?

### **Subjectivity as Ethical**

It is only in approaching the Other that I attend to myself. ... [I]n discourse I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and this urgency of the response – acuteness of the present – engenders me for responsibility; as responsible I am brought to my final reality... When I seek my final reality, I find that my existence as a ‘thing in itself’ begins with the presence in me of the idea of Infinity. (TI, pp. 178-79)

In this passage, we see the idea that my subjectivity, my final reality, is only as one responsible for the Other. I am thus, contra Heidegger, not fundamentally a being-towards-death so much as I am a being-towards-the-other, or a being-*for*-the-Other. Being oneself in this way means to express oneself, which is already to serve the

Other in a relation of obligation. The address of the Other confirms my subjectivity as unique. I cannot escape the call singularly addressed to me:

The I is a privilege and an election. The sole possibility in being of going beyond the straight line of the law, that is, of finding a place lying beyond the universal, is to be I... The call to infinite responsibility confirms the subjectivity in its apologetic position... To utter 'I,' to affirm the irreducible singularity in which the apology is pursued, means to possess a privileged place with regard to responsibilities for which no one can replace me and from which no one can release me. To be unable to shirk: this is the I. (*TI*, p. 245)

Subjectivity in this view is constituted in receptivity and passivity. It is only as turned outwards towards the Other that I am. Subjectivity, the condition of being taught, means that my spontaneity, which was and is always an illusion, is called into question, and I realise that that the world is common between I and the Other.

The relationship between the I and the Other should not be seen, however, as a party of two. The relation with the Other means entering into a relation with others through the third party who is brought to me in the address of the Other:

Language as the presence of the face does not invite complicity with the preferred being, the self-sufficient 'I-Thou' forgetful of the universe; in its frankness it refuses the clandestinity of love, where it loses its frankness and meaning and turns into laughter or cooing. The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other – language is justice. (*TI*, p. 213)

Levinas's target here, with the phrase 'I-Thou', may be Buber's presentation of the reciprocal relation between self and Other, in which all my awareness is drawn towards the living reality of another. The language of 'laughter' and 'cooing' suggests that Levinas rejects the sentimentality of such a relation, or what the popularisation of such a relationship quickly becomes. Levinas's conception is far from self-sufficient and clandestine. Through the Other I am also drawn into a relation with others, so that there never exists a self-sufficient I-Thou. The third party, always already present in the approach of the Other, demands justice and justification for my actions, how I divide, weigh up, calculate and make decisions about my practical responses to the needs of many others. In this sense, the ethical relation with the Other is always already political because of demand for justice. As Madeleine Fagan writes on the inseparability of ethics and politics for Levinas, 'If the Third is

taken seriously in Levinas's work, ... ethics cannot be separated from politics, charity not separated from justice and responsibility not separated from irresponsibility.' (Fagan, 2009, p. 11) Fagan goes on to outline how the approach of the third and with it the excessive, impossible nature of my responsibility not just to the Other but to all the others means that a particular response is not determined in advance. This is the possibility of my responsibility rather than a clear knowledge of what I must do. The presence of the others, leading us to make comparisons, calculate, decide about the distribution of resources, is already there in the approach of the Other, and so we are obliged simultaneously to the infinite demand of the Other and the demands of many others, making totalising rules and judgements necessary. We will explore the aporetic nature of the ethico-political towards which this points at length in Chapters 6 and 7, but it should be emphasised here that any attempt to separate politics and ethics is impossible, because the presence of many others means that the totalisation of comparison and political judgement is necessary, yet only possible because of the prior condition of ethical responsibility. The political can therefore be seen, as Caygill states, as the movement between totality and infinity (Caygill, 2002, p. 96).

The relationship to the Other is phenomenologically fundamental, but, as we have seen, what the Other means is always conditioned by the others and in this way I am an ethical and political subject. To be a subject means to be subject to the Other, which is always is to be subject to the others, a subjection I cannot escape. As Peter Atterton writes:

the self is a *subjectum* (*sub-jacere*, to throw, place, or set under) in the sense that it is subjected or subordinated to the responsibility that ultimately serves and defines it... [T]he self is a subject, then, not in any traditional Cartesian or humanist sense. Self-presence, the presence of self to self in the interiority of consciousness (the *cogito*), which Descartes took to be the first certainty, is secondary to the relation with other. (Atterton 2004, p. 14)

At one level, this idea that subjectivity is constructed through a relation with alterity is not unique to Levinas. In Lacan, for example, it is through entry into the symbolic order, which is other, that subjectivity is constructed. In Hegel also, subjectivity depends on alterity, with subjectivity experienced as the restoration of the self-same that has been subjected to otherness. What is distinctive in Levinas's presentation is

this ethical subversion: to be a subject means that my spontaneity is always already limited in responsibility to the Other, and I am 'elected' to my unique subjectivity through the singular way in which I can respond. My singularity is confirmed as irreducible because only I can answer: 'The uniqueness of the I is the fact that no one can answer for me.' (*BW*, p. 55)

My unique responsibility for the Other arises before I could choose to accept it: I am always already obligated, and the uniqueness of my responsibility is termed 'election.' In 'God and Philosophy', Levinas describes this obligation deepening the more I attend to it:

This is the subject, irreplaceable for the responsibility there assigned to him, and who therein discovers a new identity. But insofar as it tears me from the concept of the Ego [*Moi*], the fission of the subject is a growth of obligation in proportion to my obedience to it; it is the augmentation of culpability with the augmentation of holiness, an increase of distance in proportion to my approach. (*GM*, p. 73)

This view is radically different from most conceptions of responsibility in moral and political philosophy, and indeed in most conceptions of subjectivity. To assume responsibility for the Other dependent on alterity rather than any shared membership of a community or reciprocal responsibility, is intrinsic to this notion of responsibility.

What then does this view of ethical subjectivity as a turning outwards towards the Other, always already obligated to them in a relation of infinite responsibility, mean for how we understand education at a conceptual level?

### **Election to Subjectivity – a Teaching**

Levinas's concern to show that the subject is formed in infinite responsibility to the Other, disrupting the order of the self-same, can be seen as in some ways comparable to the idea of subjectivity constructed through language, always other to the self, as argued, for example, by Lacan.<sup>7</sup> What is distinctive in Levinas's approach is that

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<sup>7</sup> I do not propose to compare Levinas and psychoanalytic perspectives on alterity and affectivity, since Todd has already provided an illuminating reading of how Levinas allows us to see possibilities for

language depends on the prior possibility of goodness, of responsibility: as one who is taught, receiving language as an *élève*, I am elevated in my election to subjectivity (Llewelyn, 1995, p. 98). This responsibility is not to be understood in terms of moments of intense relationality, but as a condition and orientation that pervades everything, including the whole of education. Paul Standish puts this well:

The Other is plainly not to be thought of as the stuff of ‘peak experiences’ between human beings, especially in view of the pervasive nature of responsibility – hardly the stuff of *experience*, considering how readily we lose sight of our responsibilities or how easily we go to sleep on them. In contrast, it is to be asked what human beings do that does *not* involve this responsibility – neglected or covered over though that usually is. If the obligation to the Other should be seen as pervasive, the things that we interact with and the way we word the world should be seen in this light. (Standish, 2007, pp. 79-80).

Standish here points towards how this way of understanding responsibility towards the Other might affect the way we conceive of the meaning of education at every level.

But what does this mean in relation to other more standard conceptualisations of the meaning of education? In subsequent chapters I will consider how reading Levinas interrupts and disturbs particular educational discourses relating to particular liberal and neoliberal understandings that have been dominant in recent years, therefore in the remainder of this chapter, I will only briefly draw attention to themes that relate in particular to *Totality and Infinity*. These themes are: the Ulysses/Abraham comparison, *Bildung* as an educational ideal, Martin Buber’s dialogical philosophy of education and Michael Oakeshott’s presentation of education as ‘the conversation of mankind.’

### ***Ulysses and Abraham***

A motif that reverberates throughout Levinas’s work and is set out within *Totality and Infinity* is the Ulysses / Abraham comparison. Against Ulysses, who after his

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ethical relationality in education, informed by psychoanalytic readings of ethics, in *Learning from the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis and Ethical Possibilities in Education* (2003a), and Critchley has likewise given a thoughtful reading of how the ethical demand proposed by Levinas can be related to Freud’s idea of trauma in *Infinitely Demanding* (2007).

wanderings returns to Ithaca, Levinas prefers Abraham, who leaves his homeland in search of an unknown land. Levinas describes the history of Western philosophy – and, that is to say, in Western thought – as following Ulysses: it is characterised by its failure to recognise the Other, always aiming to return to the same. *Totality and Infinity* attempts to take philosophy elsewhere, highlighting the engagement with the Other that is prior to knowledge itself. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes labour and economic exchange as following Ulysses's path: 'Labor remains economic; it comes from the home and returns to it, a movement of Odyssey where the adventure is pursued in the world is but the accident of a return' (TI, pp. 176-77). This motif has significant implications for how we think about education. Standish, in 'Data Return: The Sense of the Given in Educational Research', has explored how the sense of a movement outwards towards the Other is at odds with ways of thinking about both educational research and education itself in terms of targets, goals and productivity. This is exemplified in the New Labour vision that universities should become productive forces in a 'knowledge economy', in which all is justified under the logic of Capital, seeking to bring all within the logic of the Same. An important policy document issued from the Treasury under Gordon Brown demonstrates this approach:

The government's ambition, shared with its partners in the private and not-for-profit sectors, is for the UK to be a key knowledge hub in the global economy, with a reputation not only for outstanding scientific and technological discovery, but also as a world leader in turning that knowledge into new products and services (H M Treasury, *Science and Innovation Investment Framework 2004-2014*, cited in Callinicos, 2006, p. 12).

We will explore in detail how Levinas's approach, read together with Badiou, exposes the limitations of this approach in Chapter 4. However it is worth emphasising here that Levinas's writing challenges us to think about the meaning of education otherwise, beyond the logic of economic exchange that follows Ulysses' path, as instead a giving up of oneself to the Other, 'expend[ing] myself ... My work goes beyond me in ways I cannot foresee, and with effects I cannot know. Without this all is limited.' (Standish, 2001, p. 513) The currently dominant aims of productivity within neoliberal education policies or the focus on the development of rational autonomy in liberalism confront in the thinking of Levinas a vision of the ethical that

interrupts self-consciousness and rationality and proposes a venturing forth with no return, interrupting these closed circles of productive logics. While the conversations, the writing, the performances that arise within formal education may belong within the totality of economic exchange, the challenge Levinas poses is to recognise them as arising from an offering up of the self to the Other prior to this, from which there is no return. Such an understanding has been, on this account, suppressed by educational discourses, in order to confine what we can think within the realms of categorisation, exchange and possessive rationality. Although Levinas would not oppose the idea that formal education should promote rationality and autonomy, as we will explore later, his writing nevertheless challenges the *priority* that has been accorded to these in liberal education.

### ***Bildung as an Educational Ideal***

This potential provocation of Levinas's writing for the ideal of the return to the same is similar to the challenge these ideas pose to the concept of *Bildung* in educational theory. The notion of *Bildung* has been used with the sense of 'upbringing' of an individual to a model image, ideal ambition or *telos* (Nordenbo, 2003, p. 27). There is not scope here to explore the various ways in which this ideal has been conceived within education, and the relation between the self and society that is implied within the concept. However, the teleology and focus on the individual implied in the concept of *Bildung* differs from Levinas's presentation of the scene of teaching, in which the subject is always moving towards an unknown land. While Levinas might not have wanted in practical terms to challenge the idea of character development implicit in *Bildung*, his writing on the scene of teaching provides a way of thinking about teaching that demonstrates the troubling inadequacy of viewing the self as prior to the Other, or having any idea of model image or *telos* as an outcome of education.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Martin Buber's Dialogical Philosophy of Education***

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<sup>8</sup> Biesta offers a more detailed examination of how Levinas's writing challenges conceptions of *Bildung* as these relate to Enlightenment conceptions of education as the 'servant' of the individual (Biesta, 2008, p. 199 ff.).

With his emphasis on the phenomenological irreducibility of the Thou in his *I-Thou* formulation, Buber stands close to Levinas.<sup>9</sup> But Buber's educational philosophy and Levinas's presentation of the relation with the Other as a teaching depart at significant points. Buber summarises education and the role of the educator thus:

The world, that is the whole environment, nature and society, 'educates' the human being: it draws out his powers... What we term education, conscious and willed, means *a selection by man of the effective world*: it means to give effective power to a selection of the world which is concentrated and manifested in the educator. The relation in education is lifted out of the purposelessly streaming education by all things, and is marked off as purpose. In this way, through the educator, the world for the first time becomes the true subject of its effect. (Buber, 2002, p. 106)

We see here how Buber's account of teaching, like Levinas's, depends on an encounter with what is outside the self. For Buber, the encounter draws out from the learner 'his powers.' Elsewhere Buber writes that "to educate" means to draw out of the child that which is in him; not to bring the child anything from outside, but merely to overcome the disturbing influences, to set aside the obstacles which hinder his free development – to allow the child to "become himself" (Buber, 1948, p. 149), demonstrating the traditional idea of education as 'drawing out', indicated in the etymology of the term. This is in contrast with Levinas's view that teaching depends on what could not have come from myself - the idea of infinity, the site of the opening of language.

It is perhaps unfair to draw extended comparison between Levinas's description of teaching and Buber's, since Buber is addressing very specific pedagogical questions concerning the role of the educator. Yet, as discussed earlier, I think we must see Levinas's description of the scene of teaching, although not an empirical description, as nevertheless informed by his pedagogical experience as both teacher and student for most of his career. After reading Levinas, what could it mean for me as a teacher to view my students as 'bringing me more than I contain'? Might it lead to a radical understanding of the possibility of equality in educational institutions and in our attitudes towards knowledge? It would be interesting to consider further what might

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<sup>9</sup> For detailed examination of this, see Bernasconi's 'Failure of Communication as a Surplus: Dialogue and Lack of Dialogue between Buber and Levinas' (Bernasconi, 1988).



follow on from this for understanding the dynamics of teacher-student relations, and the philosophical underpinnings of these modes of relation.<sup>10</sup>

### *The 'Conversation of Mankind'*

Another model of education that appears initially similar to the notion of teaching as discourse is Michael Oakeshott's view of education as 'the conversation of mankind.' What is implied in this when examined through our reading of Levinas? If I consider my own education as part of 'the conversation of mankind', and reflect on the way in which the Other has been addressed to me through various traditions and disciplines, in texts, conversations, images, music, and gestures, I can appreciate that the not-I addressed to me is vulnerable to my response. In a very real sense, traditions survive in the receptivity of each successive generation, and are vulnerable to those to whom they are passed on. But this is perhaps to extend the implication of the vulnerability of the Other too far. The way in which each individual uniquely receives aspects of different traditions and in turn offers them to others in ways that are again different reveals this as simplistic. One way to interpret Levinas's view of teaching, as part of the 'conversation of mankind', would be to recognise the inherent risk that the learner will react with hostility or indifference towards what is brought to them.<sup>11</sup> Thus the position of magisterial height is precisely a position of vulnerability, and the 'conversation of mankind' contains ethical possibilities inherent within every word that is uttered.

This could be linked to Standish's view that we might view the content of the curriculum as potentially a form of relation to the Other:

The curriculum – say, the triangle of teaching, learning, and content – is one way in which the relation to the Other can be realised. By the same token, but accenting the negative correlate of this, the curriculum is a site in which the underlying relation to the Other – this obligation and

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<sup>10</sup> Some provocative implications of these dynamics, following Levinas, are explored by Clarence Joldersma in 'The Importance of Enjoyment and Inspiration for Learning from a Teacher' (Joldersma, 2008) and Todd in 'A Fine Risk To Be Run? The Ambiguity of Eros and Teacher Responsibility' (Todd, 2003b), but there is more that could be said on these questions, as opened up by these considerations.

<sup>11</sup> Example of such reactions are explored by Todd in relation to Melanie Klein's case studies (Todd, 2003a, pp. 32-3)

responsibility – is commonly, causally, systematically denied (Standish, 2008, p. 61).

Standish suggests that it is important to recognise the dominance of totalising forms of education that emphasise mastery of the subjects under study, and instead move towards a kind of thinking that goes beyond the self towards the stranger. He suggests that this practically challenges ‘the assumption that there must be a tidy matching of learning outcomes and learning outcomes, or... the exhaustive specification of criteria’ (p. 64). Rather ‘teaching and learning should open ways beyond what is directly planned’ (ibid.). I would agree that it is possible to view objects of study in this way: the Other is not straightforwardly the other person as is sometimes suggested, and as Levinas himself sometimes seems to emphasise. It is not possible to say who the Other is, because this would bring the Other into categories of the same: all we can do then is to speak of ways in which the Other addresses me. In light of Standish’s suggestions, it would be worth exploring further how it might be possible to view objects of study as a way in which we are addressed by the Other, and considering how such a notion might trouble traditional concepts of teacher / teaching / learner / learning.

### **Some Possible Objections**

Before attempting to draw this chapter to a close, it is worth pausing to consider some challenges that might be raised against this presentation of subjectivity.

The first challenge to consider is whether someone might take Levinas’s message to be something like Jesus’s, calling us to live in a new way, repenting and turning from our former selfish ways, in which case, someone might question *why* we should follow him. This would be to misinterpret what Levinas is saying: he is not offering an ethical option among others but rather describing the conditions of subjectivity as ethical, conditions of which we are commonly in denial. Thus, as Perpich comments, if I ask the question of why I should be concerned with the Other, the question has already come too late: ‘If I ask this question, it indicates that an other has already passed my way, already opened to me a world in which critical reflection is possible.’ (Perpich, 2008, p. 140)

Yet despite the seeming abstraction of some of his formulations, it is important to emphasise that Levinas sees these ethical conditions of subjectivity as having bearing on the way we think about specific ethical needs, stating in an interview with François Poirié that one has to consider the meaning of these conditions ‘in an even more concrete manner’ (*RB*, p. 68) and elsewhere he considers in very practical terms how our thinking about the nature of human rights is transformed and deepened by considering the priority of the Other, in ‘The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other’, for example (*OS*, p. 120 in particular). The following passage, from an interview conducted in 1986, is a clear example of how the transcendental conditions of subjectivity described in *Totality and Infinity* relate to concrete political judgements:

I maintain that this ideal of saintliness is presupposed in all our value judgements. There is no politics for accomplishing the moral, but there are certainly some politics which are further from it or closer to it. For example, I’ve mentioned Stalinism to you. I’ve told you that justice is always a justice that desires a better justice. This is the way that I will characterize the liberal state. The liberal state is a state which holds justice as the absolutely desirable end and hence as a perfection. Concretely, the liberal state has always admitted – alongside the written law – human rights as a parallel institution. It continues to preach that within its justice there are always improvements to be made in human rights. Human rights are the reminder that there is no justice yet. And consequently, I believe that it is absolutely obvious that the liberal state is more moral than the fascist state, and closer to the morally utopian state (Levinas, 1988, pp. 177-78).

Here we see that for Levinas there is an essential link between the transcendental condition of relation with the Other and the practical demands for justice and political judgement. This is not presented as a formulaic ethical imperative, but as a possibility yet to be realised in practice, and we will explore some of the possibilities of this for education in subsequent chapters.

A further objection that might be raised is whether the notion of the Other as the teacher is an apologia for authoritarianism. As Todd comments, the idea of the Other as master and stranger seems at first sight ‘downright indigestible’ for education to swallow (Todd, 2008, p. 172). However, the mastery of the Other does not come from a concrete relationship of power, and is not an empirical description of the

teaching relation, but rather the conditions of learning, which are the conditions of subjectivity. Todd articulates this clearly:

it is not as if we can transpose Levinas's 'master' onto the classroom 'teacher.' For what he is at pains to depict are neither the empirical conditions of teaching, nor even an ideal of 'good' teaching ... As I read his writing on teaching, the master gives in a relation of height to the learner a gift which challenges the subject to think outside of herself and compels a response from her. Thus, what Levinas achieves is a depiction of relationality which uses the figure of the teacher to reveal the fundamental asymmetry at stake in our communicative relationships and in our capacity for thought ... The master does not conform to the role of the teacher in a school setting; it is, rather, that the master reveals to us the dynamics in our encounters with strangeness. (Todd, 2008, p. 175)

The mastery of the Other stems not from a relation of institutional power, but in a sense from his very vulnerability: that vulnerability gives his interpellation an urgency that undoes my self-sufficiency and places his need before my own. This could be illustrated in the way in which an infant might be seen to have 'mastery' over its mother. The mother will put the infant's needs before her own, where mastery resides in the power of this vulnerability's appeal. The Other is not a specific person, but their mastery resides in the appeal of the face that, as in this illustration, assumes an authority in vulnerability as potent as that of an infant.

Related to this notion of the mastery of the Other, someone might question whether Levinas is prescribing self-effacement, an impression perhaps encouraged by the vocabulary used to describe the subjection to the Other. However, the notion of subjection does not mean that we must agree with or acquiesce in everything others say or do to me. The ideas of fraternity and community, which we will explore in Chapter 6, suggest that the condition of responsibility to the Other is worked out in practice against the needs of many others. The interpellation of the Other is not a private imperative: 'Everything that takes place here "between us" concerns everyone, the face that looks at it places itself in the full light of the public order' (*TI*, p. 212). Although my responsibility is infinite, what that responsibility means is always worked out within the bonds of human kinship and fraternity, which leads to responsibility for myself:

Society must be a fraternal community to be commensurate with the straightforwardness, the primary proximity, in which the face presents

itself to my welcome. Monotheism signifies this human kinship, this idea of a human race that refers back to the approach of the Other in the face, in a dimension of height, in responsibility for oneself *and* for the Other. (TI, p. 214, emphasis mine)

Responsibility does involve self-sacrifice, but this is not the same as self-debasement.

Having paused to consider these objections, let us draw this chapter to a close.

### **The Possibility of Ethical Subjectivity**

In contrast to the conceptualisations of the subject as a social construction, or as an effect of various power relations, in thinkers such as Foucault, Pierre Bordieu and Louis Althusser, what does it mean to think in terms of ethical subjectivity after Levinas? In such constructions, there is, as in Levinas, the notion of interpellation as fundamental to subjectivity, but here it is ideologies that interpellate, calling individuals as subjects of systems that give identities, necessary to the functioning of the social order. Levinas's conception of subjectivity does not imply the unified notion of subjectivity that these thinkers were attacking, indeed Levinas specifically states that isolated subjectivity is a myth. What is unique however in Levinas's provocation is the attention he gives to the *ethical* conditions of the interpellation to subjectivity as *infinite* responsibility. In coming to see my subjectivity as a continuing responding to the Other's prior address, I, Levinas's reader, am challenged to work out for myself what an ever-extending responsibility means in my situation as teacher and student – and this not in some theoretical elaboration but in response to the practical demands I experience. Perhaps this is similar to Bauman's description of moral responsibility, which 'cannot be taken away, shared, ceded, pawned, or deposited for safe-keeping'; as 'unconditional and infinite, ... it manifests itself in the constant anguish of not manifesting itself enough.' (Bauman, 1993, p. 250) As my subjectivity is found in this unconditional responsibility in the present, it is also shown as not-yet: this extending responsibility towards the infinite and transcendent Other deepens, yet this not in any developmental, linear sense. The possibility of ethical subject is *already* revealed as a trace in the very conditions of language, knowledge and relationality.

There is, therefore, a sense in which all education is predicated on my *already* being an ethical subject, already obligated, responsible to the Other. But there is another sense in which this deepening understanding of subjectivity challenges how we tend to conceive of education, but this not offered in terms of a straightforward moral imperative, but rather as an interruption of the way we conceptualise education. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas is offering me, his reader, a word of invitation to recognise the structure of my subjectivity as responsibility. This is a prophetic discourse that appeals to me to join it and judge it. Reading Levinas draws me to (but could not force me to) question whether I can also testify to the possibility of goodness. This prophetic form of discourse could be seen as a kind of (a)theology of education. God is central to Levinas's thinking, but here God means what is otherwise than being. This God is not some sacred power or *numen* (DF, p. 14), but the transcendence of alterity and the infinity of my responsibility, eluding intelligibility. This view of God is similar to Franz Rosenzweig's view of redemption in *The Star of Redemption*, in which the messianic happens now, the not-yet is in the present moment through the proximity of the neighbour and the act of neighbourly love. Kenneth Reinhard elaborates on what this messianic temporality means:

For Rosenzweig, love of the neighbor is not merely the first step on the path to redemption, the good deed that might help make the world a better place in some hypothetical future, but its realization *now*, the immanent production of its transcendental conditions. The nearness of the neighbor materializes the imminence of redemption, releasing the here and the now from the fetters of teleology in the infinitesimal calculus of proximity. (Reinhard, 2005, p. 21)

We will take up and explore the implications of this non-teleological understanding of the messianic as an interruption of totalising ontology in Chapter 7. But given suspicions that many have of the prominence of religion in Levinas's writing, it is worth emphasising that these theological ideas do not imply the idea of the divine as a being as in classical theism, or ground of Being as in existentialist theology, but precisely the beyond being, which is the site of my (already ethico-political) subjectivity, as we will explore in the following chapter. Such theological notions do not therefore need to be read as belonging to a religious framework, but rupture notions of education that prioritise communicative rationality as foundational, revealing the interruption of the *logos* by ethics, prior to intelligibility. We will consider further the particular challenges of Levinas's notion of religion in the

following chapter, before considering in more detail the implications of Levinas's understanding of religion for education in Chapters 5 and 6.

In reading Levinas I come to understand that who I am is always already the result of a teaching. Reading *Totality and Infinity* also testifies to how language can be both totalising and yet reveal the infinite ethical relation. Indeed the title *Totality and Infinity* draws attention to the way in which it is impossible to altogether avoid a totalising orientation: the scene of teaching cannot be separated from a totalising thematisation, even though that depends on the infinite space between I and Other. But the text calls me to be vigilant and attend to the tendency of my language, my thought, and my actions to be totalising, and move towards a more ethical orientation, responding to the address of the Other with full hands. Caygill explains these possible two orientations well:

The self embroiled within totality can orient itself towards a war against the other in a bid to preserve its identity and resources, or towards a welcoming of the other in a redistribution of its resources and a risking of its identity. The outcomes of orientation are not mutually exclusive, but are developments that contain each other and thus call for vigilance. (Caygill, 2002, p. 102)

In order to think through further what being vigilant in this sense means within an educational setting, we need to be careful that the overstraining language of transcendence does not come to represent an obstacle to attending to the concrete needs of the many others who confront us with the need for action within education. In the following chapter, we will consider how Levinas's presentation of these transcendent conditions on which alterity appears to depend have been criticised by Badiou. But before examining Badiou's critique, and the possible meaning of this ethical vigilance towards which Levinas leads us, let us first turn to consider how *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas's second major work, deepens this understanding of ethical subjectivity.

## Chapter 2

# The Demand of Infinite Responsibility in *Otherwise than Being*

If *Totality and Infinity* has allowed us to think through the meaning of education and provided an understanding of ethical subjectivity as responsibility, *Otherwise Than Being* allows us to extend this understanding. I do not propose to provide an analysis here of the various ways in which Levinas, in *Otherwise Than Being*, answers Derrida's questioning of *Totality and Infinity* in 'Violence and Metaphysics', given that this has been covered at length by different interpreters of Levinas<sup>1</sup>. In brief, I would tend to agree with Morgan's interpretation that *Otherwise Than Being* represents philosophical growth from the positions outlined in *Totality and Infinity*, in response to Derrida, rather than a radical rejection of the ideas of his earlier work (Morgan, 2007, p. xvii). Thus *Otherwise than Being* represents a revision of the central concepts of *Totality and Infinity*, using a reoriented vocabulary, examining some new issues, and shifting the focus from the Other to the subject.

This chapter will examine how Levinas's treatment of subjectivity in *Otherwise than Being* builds on *Totality and Infinity*. I will consider how the distinction between *le Dire* and *le Dit*, the saying and the said, develops the theorisation of language in *Totality and Infinity* and informs the central themes of *Otherwise than Being*. I will also examine what Levinas describes as the central concept of the work: substitution, showing how it is bound up with the ideas of anarchy and sensibility. In this way I hope to show how this leads to an understanding of the ethical subject constituted in

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Davis, 1996, pp. 63-9; Hand, 2009, pp. 58-62



an infinite, unfulfillable demand that exceeds what can be thought. Having outlined these themes, I will then examine one of the most provocative recent critiques of Levinas: that of Badiou. Through considering Badiou's rejection of Levinas's ethics, and Badiou's own articulation of subjectivity, I will suggest that it is helpful to read both accounts together, following Critchley, to bring us to a sense of ethical subjectivity as infinite responsibility that avoids the overtly religious overtones of Levinas's philosophy, which alienate some of his readers.<sup>2</sup> Both, I will argue, offer a view of ethical subjectivity as only becoming possible in response to an infinite demand that comes to the self from outside: for Levinas, the demand of my neighbour; for Badiou, the demand of the event. Read together, they offer an understanding of the subject constituted in passivity, but emerging in responsibility, a notion of the subject that offers a way of thinking about education that exposes the limitations of current educational discourses and, following Critchley, addresses 'the motivational deficit at the heart of liberal democratic life' (Critchley, 2007, p.7).

Let us start by returning to the question of language.

### **The Saying and the Said**

In Chapter 1 of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas indicates the structure and aims of the text:

It aims to disengage the subjectivity of the subject from reflections on truth, time and being in the amphibology of being and entities which is borne by the said; it will then present the subject, in saying, as a sensibility from the first animated by responsibilities. Then it will set out to show proximity to be the sense of the sensibility, substitution as the *otherwise than being* at the basis of proximity, and as a relationship between a subject and infinity, in which infinity *comes to pass* (OB, p. 19).

Here we can see that the same concern is present in *Otherwise than Being* as in *Totality and Infinity*, to trouble the grounds of knowledge and subjectivity as related to 'truth, time and being', and to show instead that the subject is constituted 'as a sensibility from the first animated by responsibilities.' Thus, as we have already seen

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<sup>2</sup> Although this should not necessarily be seen as a wholly secularised reinterpretation, following Badiou.

in *Totality and Infinity*, a subject emerges through the condition of responsibility to the Other, only possible through the approach of the Other. However, the ideas of 'proximity as the sense of the sensibility' and 'substitution as the *otherwise than being* at the basis of proximity' represent a significant development of the earlier theme of responsibility in *Totality and Infinity*. How then do these ideas relate to the earlier treatment of language?

As in *Totality and Infinity*, so also in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas's exploration of language is fundamental to his presentation of subjectivity. The terms 'saying' and 'said' extend the view of language presented in *Totality and Infinity* as interpellation and thematisation. While in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas appears to oppose the notion of language as communication, since it implies a reciprocity between self and Other, and hides the authority of the Other who is beyond the plane of discourse (*TI*, p. 101), in *Otherwise than Being* Levinas suggests that the saying *is* communication, but this is primarily the exposure of oneself to another, which is prior to the more usual understanding of communication in terms of the sharing of propositions and messages:

Saying is communication, to be sure, but as a condition for all communication, as exposure. Communication is not reducible to the phenomenon of truth and the manifestation of truth conceived as a combination of psychological elements... The unblocking of communication, irreducible to the circulation of information which presupposes it, is accomplished in saying. It is not due to the contents that are inscribed in the said and transmitted to the interpretation and decoding done by the other. It is in the risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability. (*OB*, p. 48)

Here, Levinas allows that language should be seen as communication, but not conceived of *primarily* as a mode of cognition. Communication shares a common Latin root with 'community', but Levinas's understanding of both communication and community are not founded on commonality, but on the 'risky uncovering of oneself.' Language depends on the self's exposure to the Other, risking the uncertainty of the Other's response: 'Communication is an adventure of subjectivity... it will involve uncertainty... Communication with the other can be transcendent only as a dangerous life, a fine risk to be run' (p. 120).

But what does Levinas mean by suggesting that this saying is an exposure? Morgan provides a clear indication of Levinas's line of thought:

Language involves concepts and universality; universality requires singularity; singularity for human beings only occurs as the proximity of one person to another, the face-to-face. Language and meaning are developments from the foundation of a unique I encountering a unique other... This is what he calls the 'saying', which is the ground of all speech, discourse, communication, thought, and conceptualization. (Morgan, 2007, p. 131)

The givenness of the sign to one exposed and receptive is necessary for the event of meaning, as made clear in the 1967 essay 'Language and Proximity': 'A sign is given from one to the other before the constitution of any system of signs, any common place formed by cultures and sites, a sign given from null site to null site' (CP, p. 122). But this is not however to be understood as any kind of speech act or conversational situation, but rather, as Morgan suggests, as 'the encounter of two utterly unique persons, indeed between every two utterly unique persons. It involves one making a claim of assistance and support on the other and therefore one being totally, unqualifiedly responsible for the other' (Morgan, 2007, p. 131). The signification in this saying is beyond and radically different from thematisation, and yet its very ground, signifying as the exposure of one to another:

The one is exposed to the other as a skin is exposed to what wounds it, as a cheek is offered to the smiter. On the hither side of the ambiguity of being and entities, prior to the said, saying uncovers the one that speaks, not as an object disclosed by theory, but in the sense that one discloses oneself by neglecting one's defences, leaving a shelter, exposing oneself to outrage, to insults and wounding. But saying is a denuding of denuding, a giving of a sign its very signifyingness. (OB, p. 49)

It is the said that is the thematisation that takes place in language, 'the contents conveyed in language – logos, information and knowledge' (Pinchevski, 2005, p. 10). While the Other in *Totality and Infinity* is beyond thematisation, the saying is in a sense thematised through the said:

In correlation with the said... the saying itself is indeed thematized, exposes in essence even what is on the *hither side of ontology*, and flows into the temporalization of essence. And this thematization of saying does indeed bring out in it the characteristics of consciousness: in the correlation of saying and said the said is understood as a noema of an intentional act, language contracts into thought, into thought which

conditions speaking, thought that in the said shows itself to be an act supported by the subject, an *entity* as it were put in the 'nominative,' in a proposition. (*OB*, p. 46)

By suggesting that the correlation of saying and said shows the said 'as a noema of an intentional act', there is the implication that the relation between subject and object brought about through the said is the subject-object relation of intentionality of the Husserlian conscious subject. Yet the saying interrupts this subject-object relation, by remaining 'on the hither side of ontology,' even while being thematised. The saying points beyond the said to the radical passivity of the subject as one only brought to being-by-the-other as for-the-other and this is the condition of signification: 'The-one-for-the other is the very signifyingness of signification!' (p. 100). The saying, then, is a way of accounting for signification, which can only take place in exposure to another in passivity.

This notion of signification as saying does not come from my freedom, but arises in the approach of my neighbour, for whom I am called to responsibility. This approach is described in visceral terms as traumatic, founded in the subject's vulnerability:

Saying, the most passive passivity, is inseparable from patience and pain..., finding again in a wound the caress in which pain arises, and then the contact, and beyond it the knowing of a hardness or a softness, a heat or a cold, and then the thematization... Signification, as the one-for-the-other in passivity, where the other is not assumed by the one, presupposes the possibility of pure non-sense invading and threatening signification. (p. 50)

The saying does not signify action on my part, but rather indicates my receptivity to the demands of the Other, my openness to their 'being'. This is inextricably bound up with my vulnerability and my capacity for pain and patience since, in my exposure to the Other in the saying, I am open to their capacity to be wounded, traumatised by the possibility of *their* pain, and this affects me and my response.

Despite Levinas's suggestion that the saying is thematised in correlation with the said, the saying that signifies interrupts the said and remains beyond the content exposed in the said. The language of *Otherwise than Being* itself, its disturbance of its own said through a textual performance which often endangers meaning, can be seen as an attempt to exemplify this idea of a saying which itself slips through and yet disturbs

comprehension. Levinas is aiming to draw attention to the tension always present within language in the very way he writes, thematising the saying whilst showing its trace that must always remain beyond the said. This is why *Otherwise than Being* is in many ways such a demanding text. As Davis suggests, 'In order to say the other-than-Being, language must be torn away from such ontological assumptions. To achieve this is no easy matter, since philosophical prose is both the site and the object of the struggle' (Davis, 1996, p. 75). Thus, although the saying is thematised in the text of *Otherwise than Being*, it is nevertheless not obliterated by the said, but leaves its trace, to which Levinas aims to draw his reader's attention. The trace of the saying is present in all language, as Levinas points out: 'the plot of saying that is absorbed in the said is not exhausted in this manifestation. It imprints its trace on the thematization itself' (p. 46). Thematisation therefore always involves the duality of saying and said, the responsibility in passivity of the saying and the activity of consciousness in the said. The passivity of the saying does not refer to any Heideggerian notion of language speaking:

It is not the discovery that 'it speaks' or that 'language speaks' that does justice to this passivity. One must show in saying, qua approach, the very de-posing or desituating of the subject, which nonetheless remains an irreplaceable uniqueness, and is thus the subjectivity of the subject. (pp. 47-8)

In the passivity of saying, the subject is desituated and elected as uniquely responsible, and it is towards the approach of my neighbour rather than towards the materiality of language that I am passive.

Edith Wyschogrod points out that this saying 'must find its way into the language... of the said, in order to make thought and justice in the social order possible' (Wyschogrod, 2002, p. 201). I will examine this idea in relation to the third party and proximity in Chapter 6, but it is worth emphasising here that as in *Totality and Infinity* totality and infinity are necessary for the operation of society, so in *Otherwise than Being*, both the said and the saying are of fundamental importance for the existence of society, justice, and philosophy itself. The said and saying belong together in an intricate tension, with the saying anchoring language in the exposure of the self to the Other, in a relation of responsibility. As Derrida writes, 'This lace of obligation holds language. It maintains it, preventing it from falling apart in passing through the

eyelets of a texture' (Derrida, 1991, p. 30). The said, while retaining the trace of saying, is what expresses the meaning of being:

But in the said, the essence that resounds is on the verge of becoming a noun. In the copula *is* scintillates or sparkles an ambiguousness between the essence and the nominalized relation. The said as a verb is essence or temporalization. Or, more exactly, the logos enters into the amphibology in which being and entities can be understood and identified, in which a noun can resound as a verb and a verb of an apophansis can be nominalized. (*OB*, pp. 41-2)

The said brings beings to light from their opacity, founds phenomenality, designates and allows beings to be nominated to their existence (p. 42). Yet the said does not have priority over the saying. Levinas is aiming at what he terms a 'reduction' from the said to saying (pp. 43-4). This reduction exposes the saying as leading back to the pre-original subject, not meant in a developmental state of a condition prior to language, but rather an examination of the conditions necessary for subjectivity prior to consciousness and the Ego.

Having explored how Levinas sets up this distinction between saying and said, it is worth noting that Caygill suggests that this 'formulaic distinction between the modal "saying" and the qualitative "said" can be said to compromise the radical philosophical and political implications of that work' (Caygill, 2002, p. 63). It is possible to see that this might lead to a conservative approach to ethics and politics: one carries on as before, merely more attentive to the fact that what is said is bound up with the saying, but because of the necessity of the said, there is no need necessarily for radical change. Furthermore, the emphasis on the need for the ontological, shown by the necessity of the said, as well as the structural alliances that take place with the emergence of the third party, arguably 'sanctions the violent qualification of ethics' (p. 132). We will consider the way in which ultimately the presentation of the relation to the neighbour and the third can lead to 'the violent qualification of ethics' that we must be vigilant against in Chapter 6. But here I have felt it necessary to provide this examination of the saying and the said, in order to consider how Levinas himself extends the view of discourse as teaching in *Totality and Infinity*, through the deepening of the sense of exposure and radical passivity in the saying. However, I would agree with Caygill that it is not the distinction between the saying and the said that is the most compelling vision of *Otherwise than Being*.

What is distinctive in Levinas's reduction from the said to the saying, as the disentangling of the knot of subjectivity, is described by Levinas in terms of passivity, sensibility, exposure and vulnerability, and this leads on to the more demanding elements of subjectivity to which Levinas draws our attention.

### **Subjectivity as Sensibility, Delivered up to the Other**

The notion that subjectivity is passivity rooted in sensibility is one of the most provocative insights of *Otherwise than Being*, particularly in Levinas's elaboration of this idea in terms of substitution. But what does sensibility mean here? Sensibility cannot be seen as an experience of another person, but is found in the receptivity of one to another. Sensibility makes possible any experience one has of another, and is described by Levinas as: 'exposure to the other, it is signification, is signification itself, the-one-for-the-other to the point of substitution, but a substitution in separation, that is, responsibility.' (*OB*, p. 54) All my relations with others, founded on my sensibility, depend on my being exposed to their wounding, to my being addressed in the accusative with a demand that only I can answer. I am unique, not merely one instance of moral responsibility conceived in universalist terms. This idea is clearly seen in a lecture Levinas gave entitled 'Ethical Subjectivity':

Assigned, placed in the accusative, the 'me' [*moi*] is not a particular case of the universal... I am unique, and my uniqueness consists in the impossibility of my slipping away... in substituting itself on the in-side of its own identity; in this way alone does it show its uniqueness. (*GDT*, p. 162)

This idea of signification taking place through the accusation of 'me' as one unique is central for understanding what Levinas means by ethical subjectivity.

The chapter entitled 'Substitution' is described by Levinas as central to *Otherwise than Being*. Here he elaborates this notion of sensibility as the-one-for-the-other and the condition of being hostage. The task that Levinas sets himself in this chapter is, as Bernasconi points out, to provide a theory of subjectivity counter to those theories in the Western philosophical tradition in which relations to beings take place primarily through knowledge (Bernasconi, 2002, pp. 237-38). He also aims to examine what makes ethics, being-*for-the-other*, possible. Bernasconi points out that

in examining the possibility of self sacrifice in 'Substitution', Levinas appears to target three rival accounts of the possibility of ethics: the egoism of Hobbes, Heidegger, and the possibility that sacrifice is rooted in human freedom. Against Hobbes (although not mentioned by name), Levinas suggests that sacrifice would not be possible unless the self were already subjected to the appeal of the other:

All the transfers of feeling, with which the theorists of original war and egoism explain the birth of generosity... , would not succeed in being fixed in the ego if it were not with its whole being, or rather with its whole disinterestedness, subjected not, like matter, to a category, but to the unlimited accusative of persecution. (*OB*, p. 118)

Bernasconi suggests that Heidegger is, 'as almost always in Levinas', a target, since sacrifice cannot be possible if the human is fundamentally concerned for his own existence. But it is not only Heidegger whom Levinas criticises in this respect in 'Substitution', but all notions of the self grounded in ontology, including Hegel and Sartre:

The reduction of subjectivity to consciousness dominates philosophical thought, which since Hegel has been trying to overcome the duality of being and thought, by identifying, under different figures, substance and subject ... Philosophy which states essence as an ontology, concludes this essence, this lucidity of lucidity, by this logos. Consciousness fulfils the being of entities. For Sartre as for Hegel, the oneself is posited on the basis of the for-itself. The identity of the I would thus be reducible to the turning back of essence upon itself. (*OB*, p. 103)

Levinas goes on to suggest that notions of subjectivity grounded in ontology or the idea of consciousness do not make sense without a prior relation to the Other. In this relation, I am an exile, offered to the Other, extradited, and it is only through this condition that I could return to myself. This idea of return to the self is to be distinguished from what Levinas characterises as a Hegelian notion of self-consciousness: 'The uncancellable recurrence of the oneself in the subject is prior to any distinction between moments which could present themselves to a synthesizing activity of identification and assemblage to recall or expectation' (p. 104). The return to the self already exiled, in contrast to this, is described as 'a sound that would resound in its own echo, the node of a wave which is not again consciousness' (p. 103). I am sent back to myself, but cannot stay there, always moving outwards again



in responsibility, but in that movement 'I am one and irreplaceable, one inasmuch as irreplaceable in responsibility.' (ibid.)

The third philosophical target of substitution is the idea that ethics could be grounded in freedom:

In opposition to the vision of thinkers such as Eugen Fink or Jeanne Delhomme, who require, among the conditions of the world, a freedom without responsibility, a freedom of play, we discern in obsession a responsibility that rests on no free commitment, a responsibility whose entry into being could be effected only without any choice. (p. 116)

For Levinas, freedom and choice are only possible through the condition of responsibility, prior to any empirical self, without origin, an-archic. The term anarchy is contrasted by Levinas with the idea of 'self-possession, sovereignty, *αρχη*' (p. 99). The anarchic responsibility to the other, irreducible to any theme, to the order of *αρχη*, is not however a disorder, but rather 'troubles being over and beyond these alternatives' (p. 101). Anarchy is the undoing of the logos through which consciousness can take control, become self-possessed, and is the persecution, the accusation, through which the self as responsible can emerge. The empirical self, existing with others, would not be possible without this anarchic state of being turned towards the Other in proximity. This is not to be understood according to the usual meaning of political anarchy, but nevertheless, can be seen to have political significance, as we will explore in Chapter 7.

Levinas describes subjectivity as persecution by the neighbour, accusation, a gnawing that I did not bring about or choose, but through which I am already responsible, to the point of substituting myself for her. This is radical passivity: 'I have not done anything and I have always been under accusation – persecuted. The word *I* means *here I am*,<sup>3</sup> answering for everything and for everyone.' (p. 114) Subjectivity is not therefore rooted in any altruistic will or my choosing to take responsibility: my subjectivity is entirely founded on my relationship to the Other. This is an obsession

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<sup>3</sup> In *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life*, Hilary Putnam explains the significance of the biblical resonances of this phrase clearly and explains how it is linked to the Hebrew *hineni*: '*hine* performs the speech-act of calling attention to, or *presenting*, not describing... "*hineni!*" performs the speech act of *presenting myself*, the speech act of *making myself available to another*' (Putnam, 2008, p. 74). In the very fact that I respond to the address of another, without which I could not have language, I have already called attention to the fact that I am present.

because it entirely dominates who I am.<sup>4</sup> I cannot escape this overwhelming domination and thus am persecuted – there is nowhere to which *I* can flee to escape the responsibility for which the Other engenders me. Levinas describes this state as being hostage, indicating the extent of my responsibility, being entirely-for-the-other, constrained and targeted. To be a hostage in this way means to be responsible even for the other's responsibility for others and for me:

To be oneself, otherwise than being, to be dis-interested, or to bear the wretchedness and bankruptcy of the other, and even the responsibility that the other can have for me. To be oneself, the state of being a hostage, is always to have one degree of responsibility more, the responsibility of the other. (p. 117)

In this subjection, I am without identity: consciousness and identity belong to the order of the said and follow from this an-archic state of already being a hostage, whereas the passivity of my subjectivity both precedes and exceeds my identity.

But what exactly *is* substitution here? Bernasconi points out the problems with trying to analyse the concepts presented in 'Substitution':

The complexity of his strategies, in so far as they can even be identified, are such that one is in no danger of reducing the essay to a theme. It is not only subjectivity as such that cannot be pinned down or identified, but also Levinas himself... There are times when one wonders if the question to which 'Substitution' is the answer is not 'what is the most obscure philosophical concept of the twentieth century?' The difficulty is that Levinas nowhere clearly sets out the rules under which his exposition is to be judged. The status of his discourse is unclear. (Bernasconi, 2002, p. 238)

Yet, as Bernasconi also suggests, certain indications do emerge in 'substitution' that help demonstrate Levinas's concerns. There is a sense that this substitution, to the extent of taking on responsibility for the other's responsibility, seems to imply the infinitude of responsibility. The language that Levinas uses to describe 'substitution' echoes the theological concept of kenosis, used to convey the idea of the Godhead divesting itself of divinity in order to become en-fleshed, for the sake of others, 'the self emptying itself of itself' as the recurrence that 'would be the ultimate secret of the

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<sup>4</sup> Levinas's use of the term 'obsession' is distanced from its psychoanalytic meaning, and is used to invoke the troubling nature of the relation with the other which reveals the passivity of the self, always already put in question.

incarnation of the subject' (*OB*, p. 110-11). Yet substitution is not the same as kenosis, since here the self-emptying takes place not out of any divine will in an act of love, but out of 'bottomless passivity'.

In substitution, my being is in question to an infinite degree. I am totally exposed to the wounding of the Other and take on their responsibility for the others, in an asymmetrical relation – 'the uniqueness of the self is the very fact of bearing the fault of another' (p. 112) - even to the point of being responsible for the other's persecution of me. Davis notes that 'the claim that this also requires that I expiate the crimes of my own persecutor takes the argument into murky waters' (Davis, 1996, p. 81). And this indeed seems to be what Levinas's notion of *infinite* responsibility for the others suggests, but he resists universalising this notion of infinite responsibility: one cannot demand that others sacrifice themselves – 'No one can substitute himself for me, who substitute myself for all.' (*OB*, p. 126)

Through substitution then, the subject's responsibility is infinite, and this infinitude is inspiring. Caygill puts this point well:

It is in this way [through substitution] that the subject assumes an infinite responsibility that is beyond its capacity, an assumption that is inspiring and elevating, since it involves the ethical assumption of the infinite by the finite. The contraction of the infinite is experienced as an expansion by the subject, for whom the act of substitution can never fully be discharged. (Caygill, 2002, p. 139)

Thus the infinitude of responsibility in the subject's state of substitution is inspiring and at the same time a difficult, unsettling demand. Julian Edgoose considers how we might see this idea as potentially elevating in an educational context:

In Levinas's terms, the teacher 'substitutes' for the student – substitution grows out of the very nature of interaction; it is a by-product of human interconnectivity and not a question of pre-existent moral laws... Perhaps the clearest illustration of substitution comes from the following questions: Imagine you hear that an ex-student has become a Nobel laureate. Would you feel ... responsible? Perhaps that's too conceited. However, would you feel implicated? Would you glow after hearing the news, and walk with a certain spring in your step? Or what if you heard that an ex-student had become a mass murderer? Now would you feel responsible or implicated? If Levinas is right, the answer to both questions should be yes. (Edgoose, 2008, p. 109)

In a sense, I disagree that substitution can be seen as a 'by-product of human connectivity', since substitution is used to illustrate the intensity of the demand of morality, the fact that it can never be discharged, and that the demand is already there. But I do think his questions illustrate in some way Levinas's idea that substitution shows how the mature moral subject is aware that her responsibility extends to feeling responsible for her neighbour's actions.

Bernasconi points out that Levinas's notion of responsibility in no way resembles the legal form of responsibility that is the focus of much Western ethics. Accepting that I am responsible for the suffering of the other, and the suffering that the other causes, challenges me to act in response: this would not be a willing act rooted in spontaneity, but rooted rather in the prior approach of my neighbour, in which I am dispossessed in passivity and 'lose my sense of *mine* in the face of the other' (Bernasconi, 2002, p. 240). This passivity relates back to the theme of obsession, of being overwhelmed by the vulnerability and suffering of the other, in persecution and accusation. As one who bears the suffering of others, my freedom is always put into question by the demands that others place on it. In discussing the notion of infinite responsibility in Dostoevsky's thinking, Rowan Williams clarifies how this idea of accusing responsibility is perhaps not as alarming as it can sound:

it's not a practical programme. I don't think it's meant to be. In the long run Dostoevsky's world is one in which what's bad and destructive for Sri Lanka or Burundi or Guatemala is bad for humanity. Because there is this call ... there are no bounds to that.<sup>5</sup>

In Levinas's world, as in Dostoevsky's, there are no bounds to the responsibility I have for the other who accuses me and for whom I substitute myself.

Luce Irigaray questions this idea of substituting oneself for the Other:

this nondefinition of the other, when the other is not considered to have anything to do with sexual difference, gives rise to an infinite series of substitutions, an operation which seems to me nonethical. No one can be radically substituted for the other, without depriving the other of identity. (Irigaray, 1991, p. 112)

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<sup>5</sup> From <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/oct/08/religion.anglicanism>, accessed 26.08.09

This appears perhaps to be a knowing mis-reading of Levinas, since the Other cannot be defined as this would bring them into the order of thematisation. Irigaray is surely aware of this, but part of her project is to draw attention to the other of sexual difference as the other. Her question however of whether substitution is non-ethical is worth pondering. *Can* one substitute oneself for another as Levinas suggests, without depriving them of their identity? If I take another's place, do I take their identity?

This raises the question of whether Levinas's concept of substitution is descriptive of some kind of ethical *experience*. In a sense, Levinas's descriptions of persecution by the neighbour and taking responsibility for him do seem rooted in the experience of feeling responsible that Alyosha describes in *The Brothers Karamazov*, as Levinas is so fond of quoting. Yet Levinas emphasises throughout 'Substitution' that this state of being hostage occurs prior to consciousness and identity, since the definition that occurs in identity is already part of the said, thematisation. Thus in substitution, I am not depriving the Other of identity, substituting my identity for his; the substitution Levinas describes is in a sense illustrative of the way in which subjectivity depends on the deposition and undoing of autonomous self-sufficiency, the unfulfillable demand of responsibility which means that I am always late. These very conditions of subjectivity mean that taking responsibility for others in the empirical realm is possible: 'It is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity – even the little there is, even the simple "After you, sir." The unconditionality of being hostage is not the limit case of solidarity, but the condition for all solidarity' (*OB*, p. 117). Whether specific empirical acts of responsibility are 'nonethical,' as Irigaray suggests is, another question.

In substitution, I am an exile – 'To transcend oneself, to leave one's home to the point of leaving oneself, is to substitute oneself for another' (*OB*, p. 182). Bernasconi points out how this notion of substituting oneself to the point of leaving oneself in substitution runs counter to the rhetoric of absolute alterity in *Totality and Infinity*, most pointedly when Levinas adopts Rimbaud's phrase in 'Substitution', 'I am an other' (Bernasconi, 2002, p. 243). This shift in language between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, however, is a difference of register, not a major fracture

between the two works. While in *Totality and Infinity*, the focus is on the alterity of the Other, in *Otherwise than Being*, the focus on substitution plays up the infinitude of responsibility and the traumatic nature of the approach of the neighbour, in which the I itself becomes an Other. The idea here that I am an other does not imply any reversibility of relation between I and Other, and Levinas emphasises that he does not mean it in the sense that Rimbaud implies:

I am outside of any place, in myself, on the hither side of the autonomy of auto-affection and identity resting on itself. Impassively undergoing the weight of the other, thereby called to uniqueness, subjectivity no longer belongs to the order where the alternative of activity and passivity retains its meaning. (*OB*, p. 118)

I am 'in myself', but to be in my own skin in this way means to be 'under the weight of the other', exposed, rather than an ego free in-itself and for-itself. The subject is in exile, de-posed from its place, withdrawn from manifestation, strange to itself as always 'on the hither side of ...auto-affection'. Thomas Carl Wall describes how as always for-the-other, surrendering itself to the other, subjectivity 'is nothing but a primordial delay behind the Other. This is *absolute* passivity... The subject would be forever devoted to an obligation that would forever exceed it' (Wall, 1999, p. 40). The subject then is always strange, exiled from its own place, through the responsibility to which it is bound by the Other but which always exceeds it. I am called to be a subject that I *cannot* be, since the demand of responsibility is infinite and I cannot know its source. This demand is traumatic and impossible, but also opens the possibility of peaceful response:

This trauma which cannot be assumed, inflicted by the Infinite on presence, or this affecting of presence by the Infinite – this affectivity – takes shape as a subjection to the neighbor. It is thought thinking more than it thinks, desire, the reference to the neighbor, the responsibility for another. (*CP*, p. 166)

To be a subject is to be traumatised, to be affected, by the demand of my neighbour. The visceral nature of the exposure to my neighbour is replayed throughout Levinas's writings. The demand of the Other is traumatic, and this trauma is not an abstraction.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Todd provocatively highlights how in relation to education, if we follow Levinas, there is always a sense of violence, of trauma, in the pedagogical demand. The question that educators must therefore attend to, she suggests, is the ethical significance of their role, and the conditions of non-violence bound up with the implicit violence of their work (Todd, 2003a, p. 40).

Levinas describes this trauma in terms of the impossibility of indifference 'before the misfortunes and faults of a neighbor, the unexceptionable responsibility for him' (ibid.).

Caygill's discussion of Levinas's treatment of the theme of hunger provides a helpful illustration of this impossibility of evading the traumatic responsibility through which I am individuated. Caygill highlights how for Levinas, the hunger of the other 'puts the question of nourishment to God' (Caygill, 2002, p. 155): God is one name Levinas gives to the transcendence, the height, of the demand that is addressed to me and elicits my response. He cites an illuminating passage from a lecture given by Levinas on this theme of hunger:

We cannot wonder enough over the transference, which goes from the memory of my own hunger to suffering and compassion for the hunger of the other man. This is a transference in which an untransferable responsibility is expressed, and with it the impossible evasion that individuates even him who, sated, does not understand the hungry one and does not cease escaping his own responsibility without also escaping himself. Individuation is this impossibility of hiding even as we slip away. (*GDT*, p. 171, cited in Caygill, 2002, p. 155)

This traumatic responsibility is limitless, exemplified in the transference between my own experience of hunger and my responsibility for the hunger of my neighbour. I can never discharge all the demands made of me, and so I am always dislodged, always late to answer to the call addressed to me.

This responsibility of subjectivity is then always there, yet I can forget it – I do not and could not act in a way that takes responsibility for all the misfortunes of my neighbour - and the forgetting of this an-archic relation of substitution leads to egoism: 'The unlimited initial responsibility, which justifies this concern for justice, for oneself, and for philosophy can be forgotten. In this forgetting consciousness is pure egoism. But egoism is neither first nor last.' (*OB*, p. 128) Consciousness as linked to *αρχή* rather than an-archy implies forgetting the prior condition of responsibility. The conditions of living in a society with many others will necessitate egoism in this sense. Yet egoism is neither 'first nor last', and the challenge of Levinas is to live in a way that maintains the tension between egoism and the

condition of responsibility, through drawing our attention to that very condition of responsibility which makes it possible for me to say 'I'.

Levinas describes the impossibility of escaping the responsibility for my neighbour as the impossibility of escaping God, lying 'in the depths of myself' (ibid.). In an interview, responding to a question about whether his 'ethics' are utopian, Levinas explains this point further, suggesting that the fact that we can be moral and hold values at all implies the infinity of responsibility he has described, but that being human we often fail to recognise and respond to our responsibility:

It is not difficult to recognize the face. There is the commandment, the form in which its excellence appears. It is commanded excellence because it is not an excellence given simply, in an intuition. It is the being that we are, being itself, which prevents people from recognizing our ethical duties.... That is the great separation that there is between the way the world functions correctly and the ideal of saintliness of which I am speaking. And I maintain that this ideal of saintliness is presupposed in all our value judgments... [I]t is the recognition of something which cannot be realized but which, ultimately, guides all moral action. (Levinas, 1988, p. 177-8)

Levinas's use of the term 'excellence' carries with it its etymological sense of 'surpassing', from the Latin *excellere*, of the face revealing the surpassing nature of goodness and the infinite commandment of responsibility for the other. When Levinas then speaks of the difference between the way the world functions 'correctly' and 'the ideal of saintliness', this seems almost a mirroring on an external stage of the division of the subject between the itself it is, and the infinite demand which constitutes it and yet it cannot ever fully meet.<sup>7</sup> This state of being infinitely responsible is the condition of subjectivity, but is never fully realised in our actions. Yet without this orientation towards the neighbour, ethics, and indeed language, justice and society, would not be possible. Levinas does acknowledge that in a sense we are all 'equal', but justice and the ethical relation depends on *my* altruism (not an altruistic will or action that is rooted in my spontaneity), my putting my neighbour's needs before my own. I can only assume my responsibility myself: I cannot project myself into my

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<sup>7</sup> Critchley and Fryer both provide provocative suggestions of how this idea of the dividualism of the subject, between the way it is constituted through the ethical demand and the infinitude of the demand it is called to take up, can be explored further through Lacanian readings of subjectivity (Critchley, 2007, pp. 63-9; Fryer, 2004, pp. 31-64).



neighbour's being to say that he is just as responsible for me. Levinas explains this fundamental asymmetry:

But, in the ethical act, in my relationship to the other, if one forgets that I am guiltier than the others, justice itself will not be able to last. But the idea of dissymmetry is another way of saying that in the perseverance in being we are all equal, but the idea that the death of the other is more important than my own is an affirmation that we are not being looked at from outside, but the essential difference between me and the other remains in my look. (Levinas, 1988, p. 179)

My obligation to my neighbour remains mine and mine alone. I cannot escape from my unique election: thence I am a subject.

This asymmetric responsibility, emphasised through the difficult vocabulary of persecution and accusation, extends our understanding of the scene of teaching as the opening of discourse considered in the previous chapter. Llewelyn comments on how the idea of subjection to the Other is always understood by Levinas as the state of being educated and requires 'a leading out, education, of the self from the ego, the turning of the named subject's will to mastery over itself and others into the other's educative mastery over the subject: the subjection of subjectivity to teaching, its destruction by instruction' (Llewelyn, 1995, p. 183). The language of *Otherwise than Being* shows how Levinas's description of subjectivity, hostage to the Other who 'brings me more than I contain', destabilises understandings of education that prioritise the development of self-sufficient autonomy as an aim. We will see in the following chapter how Levinas's writing does admit of a notion of autonomy, but a conception of autonomy always bound up with heteronomous responsibility.

Having examined this notion of subjectivity predicated on substitution and sensibility, it is worth noting that this view has attracted much criticism. Let us therefore now turn to one of the most significant recent critiques of Levinas: that of Badiou. After exploring Badiou's critique, I will outline Badiou's own articulation of subjectivity in order to suggest that reading Levinas together *with* Badiou offers a way of thinking about subjectivity as emerging in response to an infinite demand that allows us to think beyond the limitations of current educational discourses.

## An 'Ethics of Difference' or 'an Ethics of Truths'?

In truth, Levinas has no philosophy – not even philosophy as the 'servant' of theology. Rather, this is philosophy (in the Greek sense of the word) *annulled* by theology, itself no longer a theology (the terminology is still too Greek, and presumes proximity to the divine via the identity and predicates of God), but, precisely, an ethics. (Badiou, *E*, p. 23)

After the complexity of Levinas's language, his attempt to disturb the said and reveal the trace of the saying through the textual performance of *Otherwise than Being*, the straightforwardness of Badiou's critique comes as something of a shock. In *Ethics*, Badiou is concerned to expose how prevailing ethical ideologies, of which Levinas and Derrida's projects are one pole, lack the potential for radical innovation and cannot challenge the status quo of capitalism. In Badiou's account, Levinas's ethics depends on 'everything... [being] grounded in the immediacy of an opening to the Other which disarms the reflexive subject' (p. 19). Those claiming to speak in the name of this configuration of ethics, Badiou argues, have seen this as amounting to 'recognition of the other', 'the ethics of differences'... 'good old-fashioned tolerance, which consists of not being offended by the fact that others think and act differently from you' (p. 20). Within educational theory, we can certainly see this appropriation of Levinas that Badiou speaks of by those who have used him when looking at multiculturalism in relation to ethics, to the extent that, as Zelia Gregoriou comments, 'Levinas's language of the Other has become almost a common *topos* in the educational discourse on ethics, multiculturalism and reconciliation' (Gregoriou, 2008, p. 213).<sup>8</sup> But, as Badiou points out, this appropriation within multiculturalist ethics and politics is not how Levinas himself conceived the relation to the Other. Indeed, I would argue this can come to represent a perversion of Levinas's thinking, as I will explore in relation to Wright's argument that a Levinasian approach leads us towards a celebration of difference in Chapter 5.

Badiou's primary criticism of Levinas's own description of ethics runs as follows:

the ethical primacy of the Other over the Same requires that the experience of alterity be ontologically 'guaranteed' as the experience of a distance, or of an essential non-identity, the *traversal* of which is the ethical experience itself. But nothing in the simple phenomenon of the

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<sup>8</sup> For example Gregoriou, 1995, Diprose, 2001, Wright, 2004

other contains such a guarantee. And this simply because the finitude of the other's appearing certainly *can* be conceived as resemblance, or as imitation, and thus lead back to the logic of the Same. The other always resembles me too much for the hypothesis of an originary exposure to his alterity to be *necessarily* true. (*E*, pp. 21-2)

Badiou here argues that the phenomenon of the other does not reveal them as Other, but rather reveals their resemblance to me. There would need to be an ontological guarantee of the distance between self and Other, but this is not provided by Levinas's phenomenological method and rejection of ontology. Badiou goes on to argue that for alterity to be possible in Levinas's conception, the Other must in some sense be '*carried by a principle of alterity* which transcends mere finite experience', and which Badiou suggests is, for Levinas, 'quite obviously the ethical name for God' (p. 22).

This is why, for Badiou, Levinas's ethics cannot be separated from religion: the only way the Other could assume priority over the same is if it is bound up with a religious axiom. Badiou dismisses efforts to try and remove religion from Levinas's ethics:

What then becomes of this category if we claim to suppress, or mask, its religious character, all the while preserving the abstract arrangement of its apparent constitution ('recognition of the other', etc.)? The answer is obvious: a dog's dinner [*de la bouillie pour les chats*]. We are left with a pious discourse without piety, a spiritual supplement for incompetent governments, and a cultural sociology preached, in line with the new-style sermons, in lieu of the late class struggle. (p. 23)

The reason the Levinasian approach divorced from religion ends up 'a dog's dinner' is because those who interpret his approach as being primarily about a 'right to difference' are actually, Badiou claims, horrified by any differences that are not 'parliamentary-democratic, pro free-market economics, in favour of freedom of opinion, feminism, the environment' (p. 24). In other words, the only differences to be recognised are those which themselves recognise difference. This secularised version of Levinas then becomes a perversion of what Levinas himself advocates and in effect ends up as totalising: 'Become like me and I will respect your difference.' (p.25)

Badiou rejects both what he sees as Levinas's own ethics, predicated on God as the principle of absolute alterity, on the grounds that there is no God. He also rejects those ethics of difference based on a non-religious interpretation of Levinas because

he sees nothing *ethical* about that approach: 'infinite alterity is quite simply *what there is*. Any experience at all is the infinite deployment of infinite differences' (ibid.). Ethics cannot be concerned with difference, since difference is what there *is*, whereas ethics relates to what Badiou describes as truth, which is 'the coming-to-be of that which is not yet' (p. 27). An ethics based on difference, Badiou claims, amounts to an ethics based on cultural relativism, an ethics founded on 'a merely contingent state of things'. Against this, Badiou argues that there can be no ethics in general, but only an ethic-of something in a particular situation, pertaining to a truth. He sets out his manifesto for an ethics of truths as follows:

The only genuine ethics is of truths in the plural – or, more precisely, the only ethics is of processes of truth, of the labour that brings *some* truths into the world. Ethics must be taken in the sense presumed by Lacan when, against Kant and the notion of a general morality, he discusses the ethics *of* psychoanalysis. Ethics does not exist. There is only the *ethic-of* (of politics, of love, of science, of art). (*E*, p. 28)

For Badiou, there can be no ethics in general because there is no abstract Subject, only subjects constituted in fidelity to particular events. But what does this mean?

A subject, for Badiou, only emerges in the process of fidelity to an event:

I call 'subject' the bearer of a fidelity, the one who bears a process of truth. The subject, therefore, in no way pre-exists the process. He is absolutely nonexistent in the situation 'before' the event. We might say that the process of truth *induces* a subject. (p. 43)

The event, in this view, is what happens in a situation that cannot be accounted for by prior opinions and knowledges. It is therefore the possibility of innovation, making possible what previously seemed impossible, rupturing previous coordinates of knowledge and breaking with the ordinary situation in which it took place. It could, however, only occur from within the situation in which it took place. The event is only named as such by one who constitutes it as an event, and thus becomes subject *to* this event. Its truth cannot be proven: it is entirely subjective and it can only occur through grace. In his study of Saint Paul as paradigmatic subject, Badiou describes the event as 'grace ... It is supernumerary relative to all this and presents itself as pure givenness.' (*SP*, p.63) The subject is thus addressed, through evental grace, to decide on and work towards a new way of being, and it is only through this that truth is

possible, as stated in *Being and Event*: 'subjectivization is that through which a truth is possible' (*BE*, p. 393).

There are, Badiou argues, four fields of truth in which events happen: art, politics, love and science. He gives many examples of events in these four fields throughout his writing: in *Ethics* he cites the French Revolution of 1792, the love affair of Héloïse and Abélard, Galileo's creation of physics, the classical music style invented by Haydn, the Chinese Cultural Revolution of 1965-67, mathematician Grothendieck's creation of Topos theory, Schoenberg's invention of the twelve-tone scale, personal amorous passions. All these provide clear indications of how in the event, the one who is subject to that event works towards a new way of being through working out the meaning of the event in the context of a specific situation (*E*, p. 41). The subject is constituted through the process of *fidelity* to the event, which means investigating and working out what the event means in the present, forcing new knowledges in response to the event. The event will always be in excess of the subject constituted in fidelity, and in this process, the fidelity gathers together and produces truths.

Let me at this point provide some clarification of Badiou's use of the term 'truth'. Truth, for Badiou, does not mean any kind of propositional knowledge, but rather relates to the idea of being true *to* something. It is universal in the sense that the demand of the particular truth, although situated in a singular way, is nevertheless addressed to all. Critchley gives an example from the activism of a political group with which Badiou is affiliated, *L'organisation politique*, to illustrate this point clearly: 'the demand that flows from the situation of the discriminatory treatment of immigrant workers in Paris by the city authorities is a general claim for equality that exceeds that situation' (Critchley, 2007, p. 43). The demand that compels the political activist, in response to this situation of discrimination, to work over a period of time for immigrant workers, is a truth-procedure and she is the subject to a truth in that process of fidelity. But the demand presented by the need of *les sans-papiers* is addressed to all, and thus universal. This might seem in contradiction with the asymmetry of the demand Levinas emphasises, but the two ideas can be held together: while Badiou suggests that the demands of the *sans-papiers* are addressed to all,

Levinas would suggest that *I* cannot escape that particular demand that is addressed to me, and morality consists in *my* responsibility, *my* taking up of the demand.

Given this conception of the subject, which we will explore further in Chapter 4, what does it mean to speak of an ethic of truths? Badiou describes this ethic of a truth as 'the principle that enables the continuation of a truth-process – or, to be more precise and complex, *that which lends consistency to the presence of some-one in the composition of the subject induced by the process of this truth*' (p. 44). This idea of consistency as ethical is crucial for Badiou. Consistency means perseverance, continuing in the process of becoming subject to a truth. What it means to persevere will be singular for each subject in the situation in which they are located, but this consistency is revealed as 'disinterested interest'. The term 'disinterest' is used by Badiou to illustrate the sense that the process of fidelity to an event takes the subject out of himself, or rather out of his state of animal self-interest, so that the truth passes through the subject, a truth that is always in excess of the subject. Of course the individual will be interested in one sense in the truth with which he is concerned, and Badiou gives the example of the theatre spectator on the edge of her seat. But this interest is not because I *know* in any sense that the truth I am seeing has anything to do with *my* concerns. The language Badiou uses to describe this process of consistency to a truth-procedure as disinterested interest, I would argue, resonates strongly with the idea of the infinite demand that shatters self-sufficiency in the Levinasian depiction of subjectivity. It is worth quoting the following passage at length to explore this point further:

Nevertheless, as regards my interests as a mortal and predatory animal, what is happening here does not concern me; no knowledge tells me that these circumstances have anything to do with me. I am altogether present there, linking my component elements via that *excess beyond myself* induced by the passing through me of a truth. But as a result, I am also suspended, broken, annulled; dis-interested. For I cannot, within the fidelity to fidelity that defines ethical consistency, take an interest in myself, and thus pursue my own interests. All my capacity for interest, which is my own perseverance in being, has *poured out* into the future consequences of the solution to this scientific problem, into the examination of the world in the light of love's being-two, into what I will make of my encounter, one night, with the eternal Hamlet ... There is always one question in the ethic of truths: how will I, as some-one, *continue* to exceed my own being? (*E*, pp. 49-50)

The subject, emerging through fidelity to the event, is also an ethical subject in working out the conditions of fidelity to that event. The subject cannot exist as one for-itself, but only as one that has encountered a truth and thus poured out in the service of that truth-procedure, which Badiou describes as 'Immortal'.

The concepts of love and hope are also central in Badiou's theory of subjectivity. Love is 'charity' and this is seen as the work, the labour of the process of fidelity through which the subject is constituted. In other words, the subject can only become a subject through the *actions* of working out what fidelity to that event means. A teacher, for example, may have been convicted by a sense of truth manifest in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and in the *work* of making this truth present to her students, she is a subject who loves, who wants this truth also to be known to others. Hope is related to this idea of love as the persevering in the work of love. Hope, for Badiou is the principle of tenacity, the maxim of continuation. In *Saint Paul*, Badiou comments on Paul's understating of hope:

In Thessalonians I, faith is compared to striving (*ergon*), and love to gruelling work, to the laborious, the troublesome. Hope, for its part, pertains to endurance, to perseverance, to patience; it is the subjectivity proper to the continuation of the subjective process. (*SP*, p.93)

Hope is not hope in a future, but is the patience of the subject who practically universalises in love the conditions of truth. This perseverance in love declaring the universal singularity of truth is, for Badiou, what allows me to be counted as a subject, as in the following passage from *Saint Paul*:

For Paul, universality mediates identity. It is the 'for all' that allows me to be counted as one.... What designates and verifies my participation in salvation – from the moment I become a patient worker for the universality of the true – is called hope. From this point of view, hope has nothing to do with the future. It is a figure of the present subject, who is affected in return by the universality for which he works. (p. 97)

It is only because I work for all, responding to the event as universal singularity, that I can be counted as one. Hope is the conviction of the subject in what they are labouring for, in the process of which, they are in turn affected. We will consider what this means for how we might understand teachers as political subjects in Chapter 7.

But what does this mean for how we understand Levinas's presentation of subjectivity? Is it possible to defend Levinas against the charge that his ethics is 'philosophy annulled by theology'? Is it possible to relate Badiou's understanding of the subject to the Levinasian subject? Let us consider how Badiou's critique might provide a helpful opening up of Levinas's understanding of subjectivity in a way that might allay fears of religious pietism as unavoidable in his philosophy.

### **Reading Levinas with Badiou: Impossibly Demanding?**

Whilst Badiou's critique of unfaithful interpretations of Levinas leading to an ethics of multiculturalism is argued persuasively, what are we to make of his claim that Levinas's focus on the absolute otherness of the Other depends on an idea of God as the principle of alterity within this relation-without-relation? In a sense, perhaps Badiou is right. Perhaps Levinas does place too much emphasis on the transcendence of the Other, and *is* anti-philosophical in the sense that Badiou indicates in placing absolute value on what lies beyond conceptual distinction. However, it is worth pausing to consider what is at stake in this anti-theological critique of Levinas. Certainly, we have seen how theological terms – God, transcendence, the Other – reverberate in Levinas's writing. I mentioned in the previous chapter that God is not to be understood as any kind of being, or even as the Ground of Being. Although Levinas uses theological terms, he draws attention to how theology is mistaken when it reduces the idea of God to a being, or Being, instead of seeing God as what has passed-by and left its trace in the face of my neighbour. God, for Levinas, is no otherworldly being, but is what is revealed in the possibility of attending to the infinite demands of justice addressed to me:

The fact that the relationship with the Divine crosses the relationship with men and coincides with social justice is therefore what epitomizes the entire spirit of the Jewish Bible. Moses and the prophets preoccupied themselves not with the immortality of the soul but with the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger. The relationship with man in which contact with the Divine is established is not a kind of *spiritual friendship* but the sort that is manifested, tested and accomplished in a just economy and for which each man is fully responsible. (DF, p. 20)



Levinas emphasises, in 'A Religion for Adults', that this understanding of both God and religion must leave behind any numinous concept of God and affirm human independence, and recognises that for many this will seem close to atheism: 'The rigorous affirmation of human independence of its intelligent presence to an intelligible reality, the destruction of the numinous concept of the Sacred, entail the risk of atheism. That risk must be run' (*DF*, p. 15). Thus we can see that whilst using theological terms to challenge the primacy of ontology, Levinas at the same time challenges conceptions of religion and theology that treat God as a metaphysical being, the object of belief and knowledge. Witnessing to God does not take place in any statement *about* God, or creed, but in taking up responsibility to the neighbour:

the sentence in which God gets mixed in with words is not 'I believe in God.' The religious discourse that precedes all religious discourse is not dialogue. It is the 'here I am' said to a neighbor to whom I am given over, by which I announce peace, that is, my responsibility for the other. (*CPP*, p. 170)

Levinas's theological terms must not be seen in the way that theology is usually understood as 'reasoning about God', for to reason about God, is already impossible and missing the very point of what is beyond being. Rather, the language of divinity shows how the ethical is both present and yet absent, as a promise yet to be fulfilled, in our daily lives, underlying the possibility of thought. Morgan suggests that the way in which the divine interrupts ontology in Levinas's presentation can help us understand what is at stake in the fact-value distinction:

Too much of one would mean a thoroughgoing naturalism; too much of the other would mean absolute subordination to God. Neither is acceptable. Human existence occurs neither in a world of facts nor a world of values *simpliciter* but rather in a world where the two interpenetrate and suffuse one another. That interpenetration occurs in human social life, our lives with one another. (Morgan, 2007, p. 197)

While it is easy to appreciate that Levinas's theological vocabulary is an obstacle for many, his use of such terms stands as a challenge to both a thorough going naturalism that has led to some of the more objectionable outpourings in the God-debate espoused by the 'New Atheists', and to religious approaches that affirm the existence of God as a being who can be known. I will explore the challenges that Levinas's conception of illeity poses for such approaches to religion and the implications of this

for religious education in Chapter 5, but it is worth stating here that Levinas's view, emphasising the limits of human understanding of any idea of infinity or the ethical, lacks the arrogance of the epistemological certainty exemplified in Dawkins' or Hitchens' brands of atheism. As Simon Blackburn commented, 'The question is more nuanced [than their positions allow]. These people like Hitchens and Dawkins who announce themselves as atheists make it sound like a stance, as if you really know what you don't believe in.'<sup>9</sup>

Badiou perhaps challenges us therefore to clarify the way in which Levinas is using theological language. But at the same time, I would argue that Levinas's use of theological terms draws attention to what can be lacking in secularist discourses, including those within dominant humanist strands of educational theory, that can demonstrate profound lack of understanding of the complexity of the ways in which the word 'God' can be used to manifest the asymmetry of the ethical and the possibility of goodness, gesturing to what lies beyond comprehension.<sup>10</sup> Levinas's vocabulary, aiming to move beyond the language of ontology, points towards the idea of language, knowledge and social action as founded on an address taking place in vulnerability and refractory to cognition, rather than to the transcendent divine alterity Badiou suggests. In this sense, the ethical lying beyond the ontological in Levinas is comparable to what Kant identifies as the impossibility of being able to explain the origin of the moral sensibility in the self. Whilst obviously there are significant differences between Levinas and Kant, which we will explore in the following chapter, there nevertheless remains the sense in both that it is impossible to *know* the origin of my ethical subjectivity.

For Levinas then, I emerge as an ethical subject in ways that I can never fully account for. Yet it is possible to think of subjectivity in this way without this being dependent

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<sup>9</sup> From *The Guardian*, May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2009 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2009/may/28/hay-festival-ruth-padel-hugh-masekela>, accessed 18.08.09

<sup>10</sup> Badiou articulates his own atheism in a profoundly different register from Dawkins or Hitchens. To say you are an atheist in France has, I would argue, a different force than in Britain, and this difference has perhaps, *inter alia*, to do with the French separation of Church and state, the history of the Revolution, and the very different intellectual climate that is the French legacy of revolution, Marxism, existentialism and poststructuralism, the latter three all utilising to different degrees post-Christian vocabulary, which relies on a degree of metaphysical and theological literacy. Thus it is not wholly surprising that a self-professed atheist such as Badiou devotes a whole book to examining the structure of St. Paul's subjectivity, whereas you are unlikely to find Dawkins interested in such a project.

on any orthodox religious framework. Judith Butler's use of Levinas in her most recent writings has been particularly illuminating in the way in which she leads us to consider how this understanding of subjectivity, learning to say 'I' in response to others' prior addresses, is a way of considering how one becomes human. She articulates her understanding of Levinas in such a way that the specifically religious overtones of his language are absent, other than her continued use of the capitalised 'Other'. In her interpretation, Levinas is read with Foucault, Adorno and Althusser to think how the subject is subjected to social discourses that always exceed the subject, yet which constitute the subject in responsibility. We see this powerfully articulated in *Giving an Account of Oneself*:

If, at the beginning... *I am only in the address to you*, then the 'I' that I am is nothing without this 'you,' and cannot even begin to refer to itself outside the relation to the other by which its capacity for self-reference emerges. I am mired, given over, and even the word *dependency* cannot do the job here... [P]art of what I find so hard to narrate are the norms – social in character – that bring me into being. They are, as it were, the condition of my speech, but I cannot fully thematize these conditions within the terms of my speech. I am interrupted by my own social origin, and so have to find a way to take stock of who I am in a way that makes clear that I am authored by what precedes and exceeds me, and that this is no way exonerates me from having to give an account of myself. (Butler, 2005, p. 82)

We see here how Butler draws on Levinas's insights that the subject is only possible through its condition of susceptibility to what lies beyond the self and beyond cognitive grasp. Hand criticises Butler's interpretation, suggesting that her writing demonstrates 'an embarrassed secularization and politicization of theological premises, in the name of cultural transposition' (Hand, 2009, p. 118). He is right that, while making use of Levinas, Butler does not tackle the question of the degree to which his writing depends upon a religious framework, as I have attempted to address. But I would argue that her interpretation shows that the notion of infinite responsibility, and the condition of susceptibility to the vulnerability to my neighbour, does not *depend* on language of the divine. While Levinas utilises theological vocabulary to emphasise the dizzying height of the Other, it is nevertheless possible to take from this his intuition of a subjectivity only possible through responsibility, responding to an address that it did not solicit, through which its exceptional singularity is confirmed, without having to rearticulate this using the same theological

terms. Although Levinas's own understanding of religion is monotheistic, his understanding of subjectivity does not depend on this to confirm that there is separation between self and Other, or that my having language depends on my responsibility as responsivity to the address that comes to me from outside. Badiou himself says that 'Infinite alterity is quite simply *what there is*' (p.25), without needing God to guarantee such a statement.

Badiou's contention here is perhaps less about alterity and more about the idea of an infinite Goodness lying beyond philosophy. But, as with Kant, does not Badiou's ethics of truths also require an anti-philosophical moment, in which, as in Levinas, the subject is constituted in a responsibility that lies beyond knowledge? Whilst incommensurable in many ways, it is nevertheless possible to see in Badiou's figure of the subject responding to the infinite and excessive demand of the event, a resonance with Levinas's thinking so that for both, the subject is only possible through its condition of responding to what forever exceeds it. For both, the demand (of the event and of the Other) through which the subject emerges as one responsible is irreducible to knowledge and interrupts established knowledges. Badiou's choice of Paul as paradigmatic subject of the event of the resurrection, which Badiou describes as a fable, illustrates how the event cannot be demonstrated empirically or logically within the order of being.

In *Infinitely Demanding*, Critchley lucidly draws aspects of Levinas and Badiou together to develop an idea of ethical subjectivity taking place in response to a demand that exceeds the self. So, he takes from Badiou the idea of subjectivity as commitment to an event, which motivates action that exceeds the justification of the situation. From Levinas, he takes the idea of the subject emerging only in response to the traumatic demand that comes from the Other, but which leaves the trace of that demand in the self: 'At its heart, the ethical subject is marked by an experience of hetero-affectivity. In other words, the inside of my inside is somehow outside, the core of my subjectivity is exposed to otherness.' (Critchley, 2007, p. 61) Linked with this, Critchley also emphasises, drawing on Knud Ejler Løgstrup's theological ethics, that the ethical demand, experienced as infinite, can never be fulfilled. He explains his thesis of subjectivity drawing on these three as follows:

Commitment or fidelity (Badiou) to the unfulfillable, one-sided and radical demand that pledges me to the other (Løgstrup) can now be seen to be the structure of ethical subjectivity itself (Levinas). The ethical subject is defined by the approval of a traumatic heteronomous demand at its heart. But, importantly, the subject is also *divided* by this demand, it is constitutively *split* between itself and a demand it cannot meet, but which is that by virtue of which it becomes a subject. (pp. 62-63)

While Critchley's synthesis is compelling, I do not feel the need to hold both Levinas and Badiou together in one unified theory of the subject. There are significant differences in their approaches and philosophical projects that resist synthesis. But nevertheless, I am drawn to the way that, as Critchley emphasises, for both thinkers, the infinite, unfulfillable (impossible) demand, addressed to the subject from the outside, is what makes ethical subjectivity possible. For both, the source of my ethical obligation to what exceeds me is outside of cognition. Yet in both, what exceeds knowledge is intimately bound up with the conditions of knowledge and action, and justification and being reason-able are important aspects of their ethical action. Critchley's notion of the subject emphasises the subject 'binding itself' to the ethical demand. I prefer the language of responsibility, since we are, following Levinas, always already responsible, and our moral maturity depends on growing awareness of this condition. The language of 'binding' implies, even if this goes against Critchley's own interpretation, the freedom and spontaneity of the Kantian subject and a sense of self-consciousness. The subject as one always responsible, vulnerable to the demands made on her by others also vulnerable, does allow the possibility of freedom, as we will see in the following chapter, but this freedom only comes to me as a grace, from outside.

But why do we need such conceptions of ethical subjectivity in order to think about education? As we draw this chapter to a close, let us turn to consider this question.

### **An Impossibly Demanding Education**

In *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future*, Gert Biesta explores how it might be possible to think about what education might mean after the death of the rational, autonomous subject of the Enlightenment. In this he draws on Levinas as providing a way of thinking about the human that leaves open the question

of what it means to be human in a radical way. He highlights how educational theory since the Enlightenment has tended to treat educational practice as the production of human subjects with particular qualities, most importantly rationality and autonomy, so that they are able to live flourishing and productive lives. Levinas shows how we are always already ethical subjects prior to such a process. Biesta draws the Levinasian notion of responsibility together with Arendt's theory of political action to outline the fragile conditions of the possibility of subjectivity and democracy. Considering the possibility of a democratic education in response, he suggests that this view of ethical subjectivity does not lead to ethical demands about what schools should do:

I propose to shift our thinking about democratic education away from an approach that puts the burden on individuals to behave democratically and on schools to create democratic individuals toward an approach that conceives of democracy as a situation in which all individuals can be subjects, in which they can all act in the Arendtian sense, in which they can all 'come into the world.' (Biesta, 2006, p. 143)

Whilst Biesta's exposition of Levinas in relation to humanism and education is very helpful, I want to go further than this: reading Levinas together with Badiou does lead us to reconsider what the demands of justice and responsibility mean in formal education. In this way, the descriptions of subjectivity that we have been considering in both Levinas and Badiou have both descriptive *and* normative force for educational theory and practice. Both Levinas's and Badiou's understandings of education and subjectivity describe what happens in the encounter which exceeds the self, through which the self is taught, and both convincingly suggest that this encounter is ethical, in the way that the subject emerges through responsibility (to the Other, or in fidelity to the event). Both *also* interrupt and expose the limitations of current neoliberal educational discourses, dominated by hegemonies of performativity, assessment, managerialism, and marketisation. Thus my project here, outlining a reading of ethical subjectivity and thinking through how this both disturbs our understanding of education *and* enriches our sense of its possibility, is similar to how Critchley describes his own project in *Infinitely Demanding*:

I am not making the questionable claim that it is the job of philosophers to manufacture moral selves. They exist already as the living, breathing products of education and socialization. What I am seeking to offer is a model of ethical subjectivity with some normative force that might both

describe and deepen the activity of those living, breathing moral selves.  
(Critchley, 2007, p. 10)

As Todd suggests, Levinas leads us away from the idea that ethics can be instrumentalised through education, ‘viewing education as an instrument for ethics’ (Todd, 2003a, p. 6), and instead offers us a way of thinking through what already happens within education, and a way of deepening our sense of the ethical possibilities and challenges implied by what takes place.

What I find ultimately compelling in both Levinas’s and Badiou’s accounts is the motivational force of the demand to respond to my neighbour’s need, or the demand to carry on working out the conditions of fidelity to the particular event. Both expose the illusion of the self-sufficient I, the subject existing for-itself. For Levinas, a subject only exists as one for-the-Other, whilst for Badiou, the subject only exists as one-for-the-others. Both provide accounts of ethics that *invite* the reader to respond and awaken to the conditions of their own responsibility. Whilst neither provides any kind of normative framework that could in any way be *applied* to education, both lead us towards a kind of thinking about education that moves beyond instrumentalist frameworks.

In each of the following five chapters, I will examine specific debates within education and consider how this reading of subjectivity, drawing on central themes in both Levinas and Badiou’s presentations, disturbs and changes the way we understand these discourses. If, as I suggested earlier, philosophy of education arises from disappointment with the status quo, then Levinas and Badiou provide a motivating reading of the meaning of ethics and education, that allows us respond to some of the disappointments experienced by those working within education. The importance of continuing to reflect on the possibility of the ethical subject could be seen as constituting a form of resistance to current ways of thinking about education which seem colonised by thinking of the student and her parent primarily as consumers of education, a set of skills the product of such an education. Levinas and Badiou allow us to step beyond and outside such limiting logics in an act of resistance. As Catherine Chalier writes:



The reflection on the *moral subject* in a world marked by objectivism, scientific speculations, and by the negation in some quarters of any specificity to man, also constitutes a point of resistance. But, in its fragility, and in the face of the constant perils, is that point invincible?

The task of the *moral subject* is to allow that question to receive a positive response. (Chalier, 2002, p. 175)

These impossible demands of responsibility need not be seen as forbidding, but rather, as Critchley suggests, as a reason for courage, persevering to create a better education despite the fact that we will never fully succeed, because the demands of responsibility are limitless. He expresses this need for perseverance in response to the infinite demands of subjectivity well:

far from failure being a reason for dejection or disaffection, ... it should be viewed as the condition for courage in ethical action. The motto for ethical subjectivity is given by Beckett in *Worstwood Ho*, 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better.' (Critchley, 2007, p. 55)

As educational theorists and teachers, this reading of subjectivity leads us to see that all we can and should do is fail *better*, working towards *better* responses to the problems and demands that education confronts us with. What is demanded is perseverance in moving towards a better justice and a better education in response to the needs of the many neighbours who confront me with their vulnerability. In the words of Beckett that Badiou frequently cites: *il faut continuer*.



## Chapter 3

# The Very Subjection of the Subject: Heteronomy, Autonomy and the Aims of Education

Thus far we have explored Levinas's description in *Totality and Infinity* of subjectivity as a condition of being taught, taking place when I am addressed by the Other who looks for my response, through which I can have language and knowledge. We have also seen how *Otherwise than Being* extends this idea of subjectivity as only possible through the condition of being susceptible to an infinite demand, my responsibility ever deepening the more it is assumed, and how this can be compared with Badiou's notion of subjectivity as only possible in response to the infinite demand of fidelity to the event. In this chapter we will turn to consider how one of the primary aims of education since the Enlightenment has been the development of a certain kind of autonomy. Such an approach, I will argue, can lead us to conceive of education in a narrowly instrumentalised way, and Levinas's understanding of subjectivity disturbs such an approach.

Levinas describes autonomy as 'the philosophy which aims to ensure the freedom, or the identity, of beings, presupposes that freedom is sure of its right, is justified without recourse to anything further, is complacent in itself, like Narcissus.' (*CP*, p. 49) To an educational theorist unfamiliar with Levinas, this might seem unsettling and at odds with the dominance of autonomy within moral philosophy and philosophy of education. Levinas indeed goes further in his critique of autonomy, arguing for the priority of heteronomy over autonomy, an idea that seems to sit in uneasy tension

with the idea of education as liberating. How are we to read this in relation to the ideal of autonomy, seen as fundamental to liberal democracy and human flourishing itself, often cited as the most important ideals of education?

In this chapter, I will examine the relationship between autonomy, heteronomy and education in Levinas's writing, to show that despite Levinas's insistence on heteronomy over autonomy, his understanding of subjectivity need not necessarily be seen as undermining the ideals of autonomy and liberal democracy so beloved to philosophers of education. Most interpretations of Levinas tend to focus on his rejection of autonomy<sup>1</sup>, so it is not surprising that in his recent chapter 'Autonomy and Heteronomy' in *Levinas and Education*, Zdenko Kodelja highlights how it is usually assumed that if we follow Levinas, this leads us to reject autonomy as an aim of moral education and instead educate for heteronomous responsibility<sup>2</sup> (Kodelja, 2008, pp. 192-93). I will argue, however, that Levinas's writings on autonomy and heteronomy are nuanced in particularly subtle ways, allowing us to retain autonomy as an educational aim, but not conceived in a narrowly instrumentalist sense, but rather leading us towards a deeper consideration of the ethical implications of autonomy, always depending on a simultaneous and inescapable heteronomy.

I will begin by analysing the significance of autonomy within philosophy of education and then examine Levinas's treatment of autonomy and heteronomy. I will compare his emphasis on heteronomy with Kant's rejection of this, since Kant's approach to autonomy can be seen as underlying much contemporary liberal thinking. Through this, I hope to show that Levinas's writings are not the total rejection of autonomy that they appear to be: a Levinasian approach to autonomy, founded on a prior responsibility in heteronomy, would, in its mature state, maintain the tension between the two. Such a view interrupts the *primacy* in philosophy of education of a self

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<sup>1</sup> For example Critchley, 1999 and 2007, Chalier 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Kodelja himself rejects the idea that heteronomous morality could be an aim of education, since education already depends on the condition of heteronomy, of being elected to responsibility through the approach of the Other: 'responsibility is not an aim [of education] but rather a necessary condition of subjectivity. For responsibility is constitutive of subjectivity and not the opposite. If it is so, then heteronomous responsibility cannot be the aim of moral education' (Kodelja, 2008, p. 193). Kodelja here appears to be running the notions of heteronomous subjectivity and heteronomous morality together. However, if the former is *a priori*, it might be possible to retain the latter, a heteronomous responsibility as a moral orientation, as an aim.

primarily acting in relation to her own choices, deliberations and reasonings, while allowing the possibility for education to be transformative and liberating, for the subject to question what she is to do with the conditions and relations that have formed her.

### **A Brief History of Autonomy and the Philosophy of Education**

The importance of autonomy within moral philosophy cannot be overstated. Indeed, as Harry Brighouse points out, many philosophers have seen it as *the* key to a good life (Brighouse, 2006, p. 14). From Socrates via the Enlightenment to contemporary political philosophy, the appeal of self-determination has not dimmed as an ideal. The term *autonomos* was originally used in ancient Greece of 'self-governing' or 'self-ruling' independent city states. We can see the history of the importance of autonomy in the realm of personal morality, even if the term is not itself used, in Socrates's dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living. It was, however, with Kant that the ideal of personal autonomy came to be regarded as central to morality:

With the idea of freedom the concept of *autonomy* is now inseparably combined, and with the concept of autonomy the universal principle of morality, which in idea is the ground of all actions of *rational beings*.  
(Kant, 1998, p. 57)

The essential relationship between autonomy, morality, rationality and freedom, for which Kant argued, can be seen as the reason for the dominance the ideal came to hold within education. The idea that education should be liberating has a provenance that stretches back, at least, to Plato, and the importance of the ideal of personal autonomy within education can be seen as part of this broader concern for freedom. As well as a significant aim for the promotion of personal freedom, autonomy has also been stressed within philosophy of education as a central, if not *the* central value, for the promotion of liberal democracy. The extent of the dominance of the concept is exemplified in the following comments by John White:

Since the 1960s one key role for British philosophy of education has been to reflect on the educational prerequisites of autonomy for all, as well as on the liberal framework itself... Examples, many known to have influenced policy makers, are to be found in work on: child-centred education; the school curriculum; aims; authority; competition; indoctrination; moral education; children's and parents' rights; selection;

privatisation; higher education; educational research; education for democratic citizenship; assessment. (White, 2003, p. 148)

Robert Dearden's 'Autonomy and Education' is one of the most influential examinations of autonomy within twentieth century philosophy of education. His essay provides an analysis of what personal autonomy is, an argument for why it should be seen as an important educational aim and finally some of the practical implications of this. Since many within philosophy of education who have argued for the importance of autonomy have seen themselves as taking up Dearden's ideas from this essay, it is worth exploring their central positions.

Dearden defines autonomy thus:

A person is autonomous, then, to the degree that what he thinks and does in important areas of his life cannot be explained without reference to his own activity of mind. That is to say, the explanation of why he thinks and acts as he does in these areas must include a reference to his own choices, deliberations, decisions, reflections, judgments, plannings or reasonings. This would not necessarily apply in every instance, since what a man thinks now, and how he acts now, may reflect an activity of mind engaged in hours, days or years previously, but without losing its force as the explanation. (Dearden, 1972, pp. 453-54)<sup>3</sup>

This is a broadly Kantian definition: it is central to Kant's argument for autonomy that a free action is an action that is *mine*, in which I am not a passive channel through which external forces become enacted. For Kant, I am free when I am governed by reason: the autonomous will is the will motivated by reason alone, rather than external forces, desires or emotions. Dearden, following Kant, opposes autonomy to heteronomy, and defines two types of heteronomy:

Firstly, a man's thoughts and actions may be governed by other people. This would be so when, consciously or unconsciously, he is passive or submissive towards compulsion, conditioning, indoctrination,

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<sup>3</sup> Space here precludes an examination of the theme of autonomy as it appears in a wide range of contemporary political theorists, from Joseph Raz to Will Kymlicka, along with both Rawlsians and Habermasians. The ideal of rational autonomy they provide and its link to freedom can be seen as in many ways still broadly Kantian, and their various definitions broadly similar to Dearden, for example Joseph Raz writes: 'The ruling idea behind the ideal of personal autonomy is that people should make their own lives. The autonomous person is a (part) author of his own life. The ideal of personal autonomy is the vision of people controlling, to some degree, their own destiny, fashioning it through successive decisions throughout their lives' (Raz, 1986, p. 369).

expectations or an authority unfounded on his own recognition of its entitlement. A second form of heteronomy would consist in a man's being governed by factors which are, in a sense, in himself, but which are nevertheless external to his activity of mind. Examples of this sort of heteronomy might include the various forms of psychosis and perhaps also neurosis, together with physiologically based addictions and derangements. (ibid.)

Dearden goes on to insist, in a similarly Kantian vein, that there is a necessary connection between autonomy and reason:

The various activities of mind earlier referred to as constitutive of autonomy are all essentially linked to the idea of reason, or rather to the idea of having reasons for what one thinks and does. Choosing, deliberating, reflecting and so on are possible only because relevant considerations can be brought to bear in these activities. (p. 456)

There is an important link between reason, experience and truth in this scheme: Dearden argues that our beliefs are what we take to be true, on the evidence of past experience and other 'independent criteria'. These 'independent criteria' that he sees as determining what counts as good reasoning do not, however, threaten autonomy because they come from 'outside', since it still 'remains to the agent to employ those criteria and to govern his activity of mind by reference to them, and it is in this self-government that his autonomy lies.' (p. 459)

In considering why personal autonomy should be given increased prominence in education, Dearden states that autonomy allows us to ascribe responsibility to individual agents, and also suggests that its exercise is satisfying and creates a sense of personal worth and dignity. Ultimately, however, he suggests that perhaps it is not possible or appropriate to justify autonomy, but that other ideals might or might not be justified by reference to autonomy itself. Dearden then considers the practical implications autonomy raises for education, arguing that a Hirstian 'forms of understanding' approach to education is desirable for the development of autonomy, and that self-knowledge is particularly important. He concludes by suggesting that education should seek to generate 'motivational independence' (p. 464).

Following on from Dearden's classic treatment, the theme of autonomy in philosophy of education has been so extensively covered that I will mention briefly only two of

its most significant advocates: White and Brighouse. In *Education and the Good Life*, John White goes further than Dearden in the centrality he gives autonomy among the aims of education. For him, autonomy is linked to students' well-being, which he argues should be the single over-arching aim of education. White's definition of autonomy is similar to Dearden's, suggesting that what distinguishes autonomy from heteronomy 'is that autonomous people choose their major ends themselves rather than leaving them to tradition, religion, or others' domination' (White, 1990, p. 75). The central argument of his book is that educating for personal autonomy will allow students to live flourishing lives. He acknowledges that the autonomous life may not be the best way of life in all circumstances: in some traditional societies, for example, well-being consists in living a fulfilled life according to the customs of those societies (p. 26). White develops Joseph Raz's argument<sup>4</sup> that autonomy is not necessarily an intrinsic aspect of human flourishing, but he seems to go further than Raz in suggesting that since we live in an autonomy-supporting society, it is difficult to imagine an individual's well-being not involving autonomy (p. 103). Furthermore, even though it might be possible to live a fulfilled life in a non-autonomy-supporting society, White elsewhere argues that a life in which children can make decisions for themselves about how to live their lives is preferable to a life in which those children might flourish within a way of life that their parents choose for them (White, 2006, p. 386).

Brighouse likewise argues that although autonomy is not necessary for life to be worth living, it nevertheless plays an important part in enabling people to live flourishing lives (Brighouse, 2006, p. 15). He suggests that to live well, one needs to know what living well consists of; autonomy means educating children in the skills of rational reflection and comparison which provide them with the opportunity to decide what living well means. This rational reflection is elaborated as taking place within a social context:

Autonomy has a deeply social aspect, not least because human beings are deeply social beings. Individuals do not flourish separately from others; their interests are bound up with those of other people, and their reflection takes place within a given social context... Rational reflection can help us to detect inconsistencies and fallacious argumentation, and to uncover

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<sup>4</sup> Raz, 1986, pp. 369 ff.

misuse of evidence. It helps us to see whether a choice coheres with our given judgements, including our judgements about what sort of person we ought to be. (p. 20)

Personal autonomy is central enough a goal for Brighouse that it is the major theme of his recent introduction to philosophy of education: *On Education*. This is a fair reflection of the dominance of the concept of autonomy within contemporary philosophy of education. Furthermore, while most philosophers of education suggest that it is possible to conceive of flourishing without autonomy, and therefore limit their discussion of autonomy to liberal societies, there are others who would go further and suggest that the development of personal autonomy should be a goal of education within *all* societies. Harvey Siegel, for example, writes:

Why limit the desirability of education for autonomy and critical rationality to liberal... societies? Are ideals like autonomy and critical rationality society-relative? ... As is well known, many theorists, myself included, uphold particular ideals independent of society-type, and hold that, philosophical niceties aside, particular ideals – in my case, critical thinking – are in fact applicable to all societies and the people within them, whether or not those ideals are in fact endorsed by particular societies or their members. (Siegel, 2008, p. 182)

But how desirable is autonomy as an educational aim? There have been several critiques of the dominance of autonomy within educational theory and before we consider Levinas's heteronomous responsibility, let us first consider more familiar criticisms that have been posed.

### **Is Autonomy Really So Desirable?**

The questioning of autonomy's dominance within education has most significantly come from those arguing from existentialist or communitarian positions. David Cooper, for example, in *Authenticity and Learning*, examines Dearden's arguments and concludes that apparent similarities between autonomy and authenticity as educational ideals are superficial. The main difference between autonomy and authenticity, he argues, is the importance given to rationality by advocates of autonomy. Cooper instead uses Nietzsche's genealogical approach, interpreted via a Foucauldian paradigm of reflexivity, to suggest that instead of focusing just on rational justifications for beliefs and testing of opinions, education should encourage

an examination of why individuals and societies come to hold the wide variety of beliefs, values and attitudes that they do. Such an approach, encouraging the re-examination of dogmas, will ultimately be liberating for the individual:

there is a sense in which this approach places the individual in a freer relation to claims to knowledge. For it is in the individual's scope to challenge and reformulate the guiding purposes, and hence the current claims to truth and knowledge. If, as Foucault puts it, the instruments of knowledge are not for putting us into contact with reality, but for *cutting*, then like the engraver's art, like any art, the will to knowledge will contain its own mixture of freedom and discipline. (Cooper, 1991, p. 145)

Stefaan Cuypers and Michael Bonnett likewise draw on existentialist as well as communitarian perspectives to argue that autonomy is limited in its reach as an educational ideal and should be coupled with authenticity. In 'Autonomy and Authenticity in Education', they draw attention to the existentialist notion of authenticity, which they contrast with the emphasis on rational autonomy found in Dearden. They describe authenticity as the recognition of both the freedom we already find ourselves possessing and the importance of the will in deciding for ourselves how best to live:

For the existentialist, we are *always* free ... in the sense of having a choice as to how to respond to the situations in which we find ourselves. As individuals, in many ways we are 'thrown' into life, but we must decide – and take responsibility for – the commitments and projects that we give ourselves. To live in this way is to be authentic – to be true to ourselves. (Cuypers and Bonnett, 2003, p. 328)

Using Harry Frankfurt's idea of the person as 'volitional entity', Cuypers and Bonnett suggest that the formation of the individual's will occurs in passivity. Our individual cares and concerns are not necessarily part of our rationality in this account, but are rather volitional necessities, so that personal identity is constituted by our unique concerns. 'Authentic' freedom consists then in the process of becoming aware of and acknowledging our concerns and 'accepting responsibility for their expression' so that 'we become the authors of our own lives – truly free' (p. 331). In relation to this, they cite Charles Taylor's communitarian views to consider how the evaluative attitudes we learn in the process of becoming free derive from 'the community's horizons of significance.' Personal identity can only have meaning against the backdrop of the community's horizons of significance. Thus becoming authentic for Taylor (and for



Cuypers and Bonnett) means entering into dialogue and defining oneself in dialogue, 'while at the same time involving creation, originality and opposition to the rules of society' (Taylor, cited p. 335).

Hanan Alexander also presents a critique of the dominance of rational autonomy within education through a communitarian reading of value-pluralism. In 'What is Common about Common Schooling?' he criticises the account of rational autonomy that conceives of liberalism as an ideal form of life, as in Brighouse and White's accounts. Instead, Alexander argues that moral agency should be placed at the heart of education in liberal societies. Rational autonomy, he suggests, implies an ideal of neutrality and universal liberalism still entertains the 'view from nowhere'. Within the pluralistic liberalism he sees as preferable to universal liberalism, those who are initiated into different traditions and communities should be educated with a proclivity to enter into dialogue with those holding differing and even incommensurate views, as an intrinsic aspect of moral agency. This does not mean that these discussions are necessarily without rationality, but that since the rules of rational assessment may not be available to all within the dialogue, for example, those for whom certain religious teachings claim greater legitimacy than rules of logic, the requirement of rational autonomy is not as important as the requirement that all groups within a liberal democracy are able to participate in the processes of discussion and interpretation (Alexander, 2007, p. 619).

Alexander goes on to argue that the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy assumed by those arguing for autonomy is not clear-cut. He points out that what we know is not acquired 'objectively', but rather 'through personal encounters among human subjects – husbands and wives, parents and children, teachers and students, friends and lovers – and between those subjects and the data and ideals that inform and give direction to their lives.' (p. 620) In such encounters, we are always already within traditions and ways of life, which we receive into ourselves, rather than standing outside of them:

Under these conditions, the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy is a bit misleading, since the boundaries between inside and outside the self are blurred. A way of life that on one account might have

been perceived as external becomes the very content through which one achieves self-definition. (p. 620)

Alexander's highlighting of the idea that the distinctions between autonomy and heteronomy are blurred moves against the current of much philosophy of education. Although the advocates of autonomy do allude to the fact that any personal autonomy can only emerge through the individual's dependence on others, the recognition of this is not seen as an essential element of autonomy as an educational ideal, and there remains a privileging of the power of rational argumentation, understood in a particular way, as the means by which autonomy can develop. Thus although Brighouse saw autonomy as having a deeply social aspect, nevertheless it is rational reflection, he emphasises, that 'helps us to see whether a choice coheres with our given judgements' and facilitates 'autonomous decision-making' (2006, p. 20).<sup>5</sup> Alexander's questioning of this ideal highlights how the privileging of autonomy tends to neglect the way in which autonomy is always bound up with heteronomy. Heteronomy must not be seen as a stage to be passed through *en route* to the independent state of autonomy. If the self is always being brought into being through others, then the boundaries of what counts as 'my own activity of mind' are never fixed, and what is 'mine' will always be a gift from an other, as we saw in relation to *Totality and Infinity*.

Although Levinas's writing on autonomy and heteronomy seems at first sight, contra Alexander, to highlight the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy, scandalously privileging heteronomy over autonomy, I think it is possible to see Levinas as also leading us to consider that heteronomy and autonomy are bound together in an intricate relation, but he takes us further than Alexander in considering the visceral nature of my exposure to otherness, on which my subjectivity depends.<sup>6</sup> Having considered the prominence accorded to autonomy within philosophy of education, let us turn to Levinas's account.

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<sup>5</sup> In his very clear examination of autonomy as an education aim, Christopher Winch also acknowledges that autonomy can only develop through prior dependence on others (Winch, 2005, p. 67).

<sup>6</sup> I would not wish to emphasise too far similarities between Alexander's account of the heteronomous aspects of autonomy and that of Levinas. Alexander would perhaps be more comfortable with a Deweyan formulation, to the effect that we are necessarily social, that does not capture the asymmetry and vertiginous ethical force of Levinas's articulation.

## Heteronomy before Autonomy: Levinas and the Kantian Tradition

There is a jarring effect in moving between the discourses on autonomy we have so far been concerned with and Levinas's writing on the subject. While Dearden, Brighouse and White appeal to reason to justify their defence of autonomy as an educational aim, Levinas's writing on heteronomy sounds an entirely different note. His most extended discussion of heteronomy and autonomy is found in the 1957 essay, 'Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity'. Autonomy, in this view, is rejected because it does violence to the alterity of the Other, reducing the Other to *my* categories, the activity of *my* own mind:

Freedom, autonomy, the *reduction of the other to the same*, lead to this formula: the conquest of being by man over the course of history. This reduction does not represent some abstract schema; it is man's ego. The existence of an ego takes place as an identification of the diverse... The ego, the oneself, the ipseity (as it is called in our time), does not remain invariable in the midst of change like a rock assailed by the waves (which is anything but invariable); the ego remains the same by making of disparate and diverse events a history – its history. And this is the original event of the identification of the same, prior to the identity of a rock, and a condition of that identity. (CP, p. 48)

Levinas here criticises autonomy as it conquers man, covering over the difference of individuals. 'Ego' here is not a psychoanalytical construct, but refers to the idea of a rational subject who seeks to bring disparate and diverse events and people within the identification of its own terms and its own history. Thus autonomy, in this scheme, aims to make alterity disappear.

This is also one of the major themes of the opening section of *Totality and Infinity*, in which Levinas distinguishes between two types of knowledge: knowledge that aims at bringing the other into the category of the same (which he terms comprehension and ontology) and knowledge which allows the known to manifest its alterity. Of the former, he writes:

theory... designates comprehension [intelligence] – the logos of being – that is, a way of approaching the known being such that its alterity with regard to the knowing being vanishes... This mode of depriving the known being of its alterity can be accomplished only if it is aimed at through a third term, a neutral term, which itself is not a being; in it the

third term may appear as a concept thought. Then the individual that exists abdicates into the general that is thought. (*TI*, p. 42)

Levinas states that philosophy has sought to bring the other into the realm of the same, reducing the other to a neutral, comprehensible third term. This he describes as the essential approach of Greek philosophy, so that the self is not disturbed by the approach of the Other, but rather, the Other is neutralised and the self is free in relation to itself, as we have already seen: 'This primacy of the same was Socrates's teaching: to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me, as though from all eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside – to receive nothing, or to be free.' (p. 43) Freedom here is the freedom of reason, obliterating the alterity of the other, since it cannot be limited or threatened by anything outside itself. The Other is neutralised by becoming an object, thematised and comprehended only as the same: 'the neutralization of the other who becomes a theme or object – appearing, that is, taking its place in the light – is precisely his reduction to the same.' (*ibid.*)

It is this idea of the freedom of the self, bringing the Other within the same, that Levinas equates with autonomy. In 'Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity' he describes this exclusion of alterity in polemical terms. Opinion makes of the self an other and, to prevent this, philosophy aims to encompass every other in the same, bring it under the rule of self government / autonomy:

Autonomy or heteronomy? The choice of Western philosophy has most often been on the side of freedom and the same. Was not philosophy born, on Greek soil, to dethrone opinion, in which all tyrannies lurk and threaten? With opinion the most subtle and treacherous poison seeps into the soul, altering it in its depths, making of it an other... Against the turbid and disturbing participation opinion presupposes, philosophy willed souls that are separate and in a sense, impenetrable. The idea of the same, the idea of freedom, seemed to offer the most firm guarantee of such a separation.

Thus Western thought very often seemed to exclude the transcendent, encompass every other in the same, and proclaim the philosophical birthright of autonomy. (*CP*, p. 48)

It is not difficult to see that the ideal of autonomy we have examined in philosophy of education is laid open to Levinas's attack, particularly Brighouse's account, suggesting a self who compares different opinions, beliefs, ways of life, from a neutral standpoint, in order to decide the best, in rational terms. Education should, in

this standard view, create individuals who are free to choose which of the different options has most justification. This appears in almost direct opposition to Levinas's description of the self's relation with the Other, in which I am brought 'more than I contain' and the complacency of my self-sufficiency is shattered. That Levinas's description stands in such seemingly sharp opposition to the prominence given to the rational, autonomous self in educational theory is not that surprising. Much contemporary liberal thinking is indebted to Kant, and since Kant, or a Kantian approach to knowledge, is one of Levinas's philosophical targets, it is natural that there appears to be tension between in the different ideals of education.<sup>7</sup> Given the significant influence of Kant in the philosophical heritage of the concept of autonomy, it is worth pausing to consider further the relation between his concept of autonomy and Levinas's apparent rejection of it.

Levinas makes it very clear, in *Otherwise than Being* in particular, that Kantian philosophy is in opposition to his own philosophical project. Paul Davies points out that Levinas equates Kantianism with the ontology of which he is so critical within philosophy:

One of the key subtexts of *Otherwise than Being* [is] ... a polemical engagement with Kant, a polemic that reaches its harshest judgement in the final chapter with the book's last reference to Kant and the claim that 'Kantianism is the basis of philosophy if philosophy is ontology' (*OB*, p. 179). (Davies, 2002, p. 164)

In *Otherwise than Being*, as we have seen, Levinas is questioning the conditions of the possibility of knowledge. For Kant, it is possible to separate sensibility and intuition, and cognitive understanding is derived from the pure intuition that separates from the thing to be comprehended what sensibility attaches to it, making ontology possible. For Levinas, it is impossible to separate sensibility from intuition and knowledge in this way, and refuting this approach is a major concern of his philosophical project. For Levinas, as we have seen, it is only through sensibility to the Other that I could have language and knowledge. This is not to deny the importance of knowledge or rationality, but rather to question the grounds of knowledge that Kant's project had established. It is therefore the difference in their

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<sup>7</sup> We have already seen something of the Kantian influence on Dearden, and it can also be seen, for example, in Brighouse, 2006, p. 14.

attitudes towards sensibility and rationality that can be seen as underlying the major divergence between Kant and Levinas on autonomy.

Levinas, in 'Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity', likens heteronomy to the encounter with the Other beyond thought. Philosophy has rejected such an approach as challenging the freedom of the self and has thus sought to overcome that Other and bring it into the realm of the same, in autonomy:

When, in the philosophical life..., there arises a term foreign to the philosophical life, other – the land that supports us and disappoints our efforts, the sky that elevates us and ignores us, the forces of nature that aid us and kill us..., men who love us and enslave us – it becomes an obstacle; it has to be surmounted and integrated into this life. (CP, p. 49)

Levinas reverses these terms, preferring heteronomy. 'Heteronomy' literally means, as its etymology suggests, to be governed by the other, but it is important to clarify what Levinas means by this, and why his use of the term is not exactly the same as Kant's.

For Levinas, heteronomy is the state of subjection to the Other: I am indebted to the Other and elected by them to a non-reciprocal responsibility. We have seen how Levinas's whole project is an attempt to unsettle our tendency towards totalising ways of thinking, challenging the complacency of the self-sufficient I. Rather than a subject who chooses, autonomously, to accept responsibility for others, I am responsible for and to the other person *before* I am capable of choice, and only become a subject in heteronomy. Levinas suggests that this strand of thinking of subjectivity as heteronomous does have a history within philosophy, even if autonomy has more often been the preference. Unsurprisingly, he states that his approach is opposed to Heideggerians, and neo-Hegelians, but he finds recognition of alterity in Plato's vision of the good beyond Being and Descartes's analysis of the idea of infinity. He describes this acceptance of alterity and transcendence within philosophy as 'a tradition at least as ancient [as the tendency towards autonomy], that which does not read right in might and does not reduce *every other* to the same' (CP, p. 53).

Given Levinas's preference for heteronomy over autonomy, how does this relate to freedom? And is he really so critical of the Kantian legacy as appears to be the case? The most detailed commentary on autonomy as the major fracture between Kant and Levinas is given by Catherine Chalier, in her excellent *What Ought I to Do?*. Chalier argues that freedom is important for both Kant *and* Levinas, but while Kant sees autonomy as intrinsic to freedom, Levinas separates freedom from autonomy. She explains:

Kant asserts that every form of heteronomy without exception leads to the destruction of ethics, whereas Levinas does not hesitate to reconsider the case ... Is freedom a lost cause, then? No, says Levinas. Unlike Kant, he distinguishes the concept of freedom from that of autonomy, conceiving of the former as the subject's accession to its irreplaceable uniqueness or as election. For Kant, the moral law appeals to the self as lawmaker – hence the constitutive autonomy of ipseity. Conversely, for Levinas, it entails the imperative of an exteriority – hence heteronomy. (Chalier, 2002, pp. 6-7)

This is an important point. Why is Levinas able to distinguish autonomy and freedom, and link freedom to heteronomy, whereas for Kant, autonomy and freedom are inextricably bound? Since the prominence of autonomy within education can be traced to a broader concern for freedom, this question is significant. In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant postulates freedom as the key to the autonomy of the will, which he sees as a property belonging to rational beings only. Freedom of the will is the possibility of its exercise without the coercion of external forces:

*Will* is a kind of causality of living beings insofar as they are rational, and *freedom* would be that property of such causality that it can be efficient independently of alien causes *determining* it, just as *natural necessity* is the property of the causality of all nonrational beings to be determined to activity by the influence of alien causes. (Kant, 1998, p. 52)

Kant points out that this is a negative conception of freedom, but it entails a positive conception 'which is richer and more fruitful'. Uncompelled by 'alien causes,' the will is free to make its own choices according to reason, and therefore free to be a moral agent.

For Kant, the moral subject is free to obey the dictates of reason without being affected by anything else. By contrast, Levinas does not distrust the influence of the

sensible. Indeed, the subject's ethicality for Levinas is rooted in the possibility of being affected by the Other's suffering and vulnerability. It is, as I have already emphasised, only through this condition of being susceptible to 'alien' causes that language, reason and consciousness could follow. Chalier describes the implications of this for how Levinas and Kant view freedom and responsibility:

The Kantian idea of a transcendental freedom and of a timeless choice defends, to the limit of the conceivable, the idea that freedom is primary and foundational. The subject's responsibility is deduced from it, whatever the chance events of its existence. In supporting the thesis of the moral subject's election, Levinas displaces the axis of that mode of thought. Only the response to election or to that appeal – responsibility – gives man a sense of freedom. In discovering that it alone is capable of responding, the subject discovers its uniqueness and only then its freedom. The subject – free, unique, and capable of response – knows it is solicited from time immemorial. (Chalier, 2002, p. 7)

Chalier here emphasises how it is this notion of *election*, central to Levinas's conception of subjectivity, that underscores the difference between his and Kant's understandings of freedom. Levinas, as Chalier highlights, is challenging the idea that freedom is primary, 'displacing that axis' by arguing that responsibility is what is primary, and it is only following on from the condition of my responsibility that I could be free.

Kant, as I have emphasised, rejects heteronomy as 'the source of all spurious principles of morality' (Kant, 1998, p. 47). This is not to say that heteronomy does not have an important place in Kant's thinking on education. Children, Kant recognises, are heteronomously determined and not yet capable of choosing to submit to the dictates of reason. The educator therefore has the role of either leading (or forcing) the child to tame his urges and submit to the moral law. But heteronomy is here a stage to be gone through, not a constituent of mature morality. As Kodelja explains:

For Kant, heteronomy has a value only as a means for achieving autonomy. At the beginning of the educational process a child is, due to discipline and constraint, subjected to absolute obedience. But, step by step, he desists from obeying someone who is not himself and starts to obey himself or, if we prefer, reason. At this point, obedience becomes voluntary, that is to say, an obedience which is no longer founded on the authority of the other, but an obedience which is obedience to oneself. In



this way a child passes on from heteronomy to autonomy. (Kodelja, 2008, p. 188)

The moral moment, for Kant, happens when one has passed through the stage of being determined by the other and comes to recognise that others are, like me, capable of being autonomous authors of the same moral law. Humanity thus becomes an end in itself for Kant when individuals respect the presence of the moral law / rational autonomy, both within their own person and others (Kant, 1998, p. 66).

Whilst Kant rejects heteronomy as self-interested, Levinas rejects the reciprocity implied in respecting others as ones potentially moral and rational like me as self-interested. The Kantian emphasis on recognising and respecting the rationality of others is rejected for the same reasons that underlie Levinas's rejection of ontology: if the Other is not recognised as rational, like me, but is seen as non-rational, or lacking rational capabilities, he is not a member of the kingdom of ends. Putnam explains the fundamental significance of this pointedly: if ethics is grounded in the idea that we are all 'fundamentally the same', then 'a door is opened for a Holocaust. One only has to believe that some people are not "really" the same to destroy the force of such a grounding.' Even if Kant is not necessarily presuming a fundamental sameness of persons, by grounding ethics in common rationality, the question is raised of 'what becomes of our obligations to those whose rationality we can more or less plausibly deny?' (Putnam, 2002, p. 35).

It is important to note here that Levinas is just as opposed as Kant is to tyranny of the Other or servile submission to the Other. In the 1953 essay, 'Freedom and Command', Levinas describes how it is the self formed through its heteronomous orientation towards exteriority, which makes freedom itself possible: 'We have sought to set forth exteriority, the other, as that which is nowise tyrannical and makes freedom possible' (*CP*, p. 23). Heteronomy is not straightforward obedience to the Other, as implied by the etymology of the term. Levinas emphasises that freedom, following on from this prior heteronomy, means the creation of a just order in which there is no tyrannical rule and there can be peace rather than violence between individuals: 'To conceive of and to bring about a human order is to set up a just State, which then is the possibility of surmounting the obstacles that threaten freedom. It is the only way to preserve freedom from tyranny' (p. 17). Although his writing on the

idea of a State, and the ways in which its institutions can become totalising, is complicated as we will explore in Chapters 6 and 7, in this particular passage, there is a sense that we are commanded from the outside to set up a just State to protect freedom.

The commandment from outside is not a Kantian categorical imperative: 'it must be an exterior command, not simply a rational law, not a categorical imperative, which is defenceless against tyranny' (ibid.). It is a command heard from outside, from a magisterial height, presented in *Totality and Infinity* in terms of the face, that forms the basis of an ethical demand for justice. Chalier points out that Levinas admits of the possibility of such a law being violent, and suggests that within Levinas's notion of the command, 'the face intrudes on the subject's world as a weak and defenceless appeal' that peacefully resists tyranny, whereas any law that disregards the face remains violent (Chalier, 2002, p. 74). The approach of the face elects me to responsibility and this is intimately linked with the question of freedom. This, then, is the fundamental difference between Levinas and Kant on the idea of freedom. As Chalier writes, 'Unlike Kant, Levinas does not think that the subject is moral and free by reason of its autonomy but rather by reason of that election' (p. 79). This election to responsibility shows the subject as unique in the way that it alone can respond to the appeal of the other in heteronomy and this uniqueness, prior to identity, is liberating.

Having considered the dominance of autonomy as an educational aim, how can this reading of Levinas offer an opening into a reorientation of this aim? Let us now turn to examine what Levinas's particular conception of the heteronomous subject means for education and why it provides an alternative between the self-sufficient 'I' of the Kantian autonomous subject and the subject completely subjected to systems of control of some forms of poststructuralism.

### **Educating for Heteronomy?**

The end of humanism, of metaphysics, the death of man, the death of God (or death to God!) – these are the apocalyptic ideas or slogans of intellectual high society. Like all the manifestations of Parisian taste (or

Parisian disgusts), these topics impose themselves with the tyranny of the last word. (*CP*, p. 141)

These 'apocalyptic slogans' of which Levinas is critical are taken for granted by many today. Yet it was the anti-humanist critique of postmodernism that cleared the path for Levinas's thinking of the subject in terms of subjection and substitution. Levinas makes this clear in an early version of 'Substitution'<sup>8</sup>:

Modern antihumanism, which denies the primacy that the human person, a free end in itself, has for the signification of being, is true over and above the reasons it gives itself. It makes a place for subjectivity positing itself in abnegation, in sacrifice, and in substitution. Its great intuition is to have abandoned the idea of person as an end in itself. The Other (*Autrui*) is the end, and me, I am a hostage. (*BW*, p. 94)

Here we see that although Levinas criticises 'modern antihumanism', to the extent that much of what he writes is an attempt to recover humanism as the 'humanism of the other person,' the deconstruction of the subject as the product of social discourses opened the way to thinking of the subject as never a self-sufficient I or end in itself. In *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity*, Critchley explains how, for Levinas, antihumanism was not a threat to ethical subjectivity, but 'the former entails the latter by abandoning the philosophical primacy of the free, autonomous subject' (Critchley, 1999, p. 67). Humanism, he therefore suggests, should not begin with the human subject as end-in-itself, and foundation for all knowledge, certainty and value, but should begin with the 'humanity of the human defined by its relation to the other' (*ibid.*). This space for recognising the self as formed by the address of the Other was only made possible by first conceiving of the self as dependent on other structures beyond its own conscious control, be they linguistic, psychoanalytic, ontological, economic. In different modes of poststructuralist discourse, from Lacan to Althusser, the self is overwhelmed by and subjected to different forms of alterity it cannot master. Levinas's particular distinction here, as Critchley points out, is his recognition of the subject's responsibility as the source of its uniqueness. This election to responsibility is also the source of freedom, rationality and consciousness. Freedom therefore plays an important part in Levinas's thinking of the subject in a way that can appear somewhat absent from the antihumanist discourses he criticises. Yet at the same time, his view

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<sup>8</sup> This was presented as a lecture in Brussels in 1967, before being revised for publication in *La Revue Philosophique de Louvain*.

of the subject as having no identity or subjectivity prior to its being addressed, admits of the social construction of the subject in a way underemphasised in the 'old' humanism of those who have given excessive emphasis to autonomy and the self-sufficient, self-determining I.

When considering the ideal of autonomy in education, Levinas's approach is attractive, admitting of the structuralist and poststructuralist insights into the ways that the human is always already a conditioned being. Yet there is an unconditionality in the moment of responsibility, prior to and necessary for conditioning to happen. Critchley expresses this well:

Although the human being is undoubtedly and massively determined by the contexts – sociohistorical, psychobiological, linguistic, biological – into which he or she is inserted, this in no way negates the unconditional priority of the ethical moment which rends those contexts. Thus the insights of anti-humanism and post-structuralism might well be necessary conditions for the determination of subjectivity, but they are not sufficient to explain the extraordinary event of my responsibility for another. (Critchley, 1999, pp. 69-70)

The subject's responsibility that makes it possible for her to be acted upon socially, psychologically, linguistically, and thus emerge as a human being is also the space of the possibility of her freedom and her autonomy. But that moment of responsibility is transcendent and cannot be reduced to social conditioning. Thus Levinas's humanism is not aimed at restoring the sovereignty of the subject as a free autonomous ego, but recognising that the subject can have freedom and is unique in responsibility.

Levinas, therefore, successfully construes the human subject as heteronomous *and* autonomous: it is only through being brought into being in heteronomy that I can have autonomy, in choosing how to respond to the others and the social conditions that have formed me. To restate the point: heteronomy is not just a stage to be passed through, as in the Kantian view, but is always there, and the mature subject, for Levinas, maintains the tension between her autonomy and heteronomy. She may not necessarily be conscious of this tension: Iris Murdoch's idea of a good woman, the simple person who busies herself with looking after her many children, illustrates that this tension is felt in the living rather than as something that is necessarily thematised.

It might be argued, as Slavoj Žižek does, that there is a certain sense in which the Kantian moral subject is also simultaneously autonomous and heteronomous, in submission to the moral law. He interprets an otherness at the heart of the Kantian moral law in characteristically Lacanian terms, which challenges Levinas's critique of Kant:

What we encounter here is the basic paradox of Kantian autonomy: I am a free and autonomous subject, delivered from the constraints of my pathological nature, precisely and only insofar as my feeling of self-esteem is crushed down by the humiliating pressure of the moral Law. (Žižek, 1993, p. 47)

Žižek here suggests that the Kantian subject is *also* always heteronomous, but this meaning submission to the moral law which, as the superego, compels us to act in ways that go against our own self-interest and drives. Yet while Žižek's interpretation of Kant is provocative, it need not be seen as challenging Levinas's understanding of Kantian autonomy. There is, clearly, a similarity between the experience of conscience that Žižek sees as the heteronomy within Kantian autonomy, and what Levinas describes as the heteronomous relation to the Other. However, the relation to the Other that Levinas describes as heteronomy is *before* any experience of conscience: I could only develop conscience, language and thought through my condition of passivity and heteronomy. Furthermore, it is doubtful that Kant would accept Žižek's description of the moral law coming from outside the self, as in the Lacanian analysis of the development of conscience that underlies Žižek's argument. Consider, for example, Kant's own description of the experience of conscience:

Conscience is not something to be acquired, and there is no duty to provide oneself with a conscience; but insofar as every man is a moral being, he has it originally within him... For conscience is practical reason, holding up before a man his duty for acquittal or condemnation in every case under a law. (Kant, 1964, p. 59)

We can see in this passage that the Kantian experience of the moral law in conscience as innate to the individual himself, as a rational subject, is at odds with Žižek's presentation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that Kant does not acknowledge the fact that we might have sense that is anterior to reason. In section 23 of *Critique of Judgment*, Kant's discussions of the analytic of the sublime, which does violence to our imagination, has clear resonances with the way in which the Other shatters the self-sufficiency of the I in Levinas (Kant, 1951, p. 83), and it is possible to see intimations of otherness

Kodelja has also argued, following Alain Renaut, that Kantian morality depends on the Other, and that Levinas fails to see this, and instead presents something of a caricature of Kantian individualism. Kantian autonomy, for Renaut, is not the same as independence and presupposes:

that I am the 'source of myself' only by raising myself, as the practical subject, above the immediacy of the empirical subject and integrating the presence of the other into my ipseity: the subject that gives itself its own law must, in order to rise to the level of this auto-nomy, have transcended the self-identity of the desiring subject (individuality) and opened itself up to the otherness of the human species. Transcendence-in-immanence is by definition what autonomy means. (Renaut cited in Kodelja, 2008, p. 192)

Perhaps this is true, and there is a sense in Kant of the autonomous self as only becoming moral by accepting the 'otherness of the human species.' If we accept this interpretation, there nevertheless remains the fundamental difference between Kantian morality, seeing myself as part of the human species, even if that is conceived of as 'other', and Levinas's ethics, starting from my being called into question by the vulnerability of the Other. Furthermore, for Kant, my duty to others remains reciprocal and dependent on my recognition of them as potentially possessing reason, *like me*. For Levinas, the claim that others make on me does not depend on either my or their rationality, or any principles of morality. Putnam summarises what is distinct in Levinas (in comparison with Kantian ethics) succinctly:

My awareness of my ethical obligation must not depend on any 'gesture' of claiming (literally or figuratively) to 'comprehend' the other. I do not know any other ethical philosopher who has so powerfully combined the idea that ethics must be based on the perception of *persons*, not of

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at work in his analysis of judgment and taste. In section 39, Kant also discusses the idea of how we take pleasure in the beautiful, as a reflection that is not a form of rational contemplation, and he describes the possibility of this as 'subjective conditions of the possibility of a cognition in general'. Thus we can see that there is the elemental idea of a heteronomous self, even if I am using the term in a rather more general way than in the Levinasian sense of heteronomy, and even if Kant himself would be resistant to such terminology and reject any association between such an idea and morality. In the following section of *Critique of Judgment*, section 40, he goes on to specifically reject heteronomy on the grounds that it leads to prejudice: 'The tendency to such passivity, and therefore to heteronomy of the reason, is called *prejudice*; and the greatest prejudice of all is to represent nature as not subject to the rules that the understanding places its basis by means of its own essential law, i.e. is *superstition*. Deliverance from superstition is called *enlightenment*' (Kant 1951, pp. 136-37). Thus we can see that although one might see some form of heteronomy implied in the Kantian subject, it is not an aspect that Kant himself wishes to develop in relation to autonomy, morality or any kind of practical judgment.

abstractions, with the idea that the ethical perception must fully respect alterity. (Putnam, 2008, pp. 95-6)

If, therefore, Kodelja is right that Levinas misses or deliberately misconstrues the sense of otherness that Renault sees as intrinsic to Kantian ethics, there still remain very significant differences between the ways in which they understand ethics, autonomy and heteronomy.

But what does this mean for how we understand autonomy in education? Can we, following our reading of Levinas, articulate a view of autonomy that is distinctive in this idea of choosing to submit myself not just to the rule of the Other, since that is prior to choice, but to rules that will bring about a more just state? Such a notion of autonomy would always be already predicated on our heteronomy; someone who is being educated therefore is always already heteronomous in the Levinasian sense. We should therefore see ethical maturity not in the way it is traditionally conceived within educational theory as the development of rational autonomy, but rather as recognition of our heteronomy whilst at the same time becoming more autonomous, developing the ability to question which rules and laws I will submit to in my own life, and questioning which rules will enable us to bring about a better justice. Such a notion of autonomy depends on heteronomy: these laws come from *outside* the self, rather than any internal rationality (*pace* Žižek). By becoming autonomous in this sense, we are choosing to protect ourselves against tyranny and violence through the creation of a just State that aims to preserve freedom and enact a better justice and peace.

There is also *another* sense of autonomy for Levinas we can see bound up with the anarchic condition of responsibility. In 'Truth of Disclosure and Truth of Testimony', an essay from 1972 that precedes and summarises the first sections of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas does describe the self as both autonomous and heteronomous:

The possibility of finding, anachronously, the order within obedience itself, and of receiving the order from oneself – this reversal of heteronomy into autonomy is the very way in which the Infinite comes to pass – all of which the metaphor of inscribing the law in consciousness expresses in a remarkable manner, reconciling autonomy and heteronomy (in an ambivalence, of which diachrony is the very meaning, and which, in the present, is ambiguity). (*BW*, p. 105)

In passivity, the Other addresses me and I am heteronomous, yet the address invites and founds my responsibility, and it is within myself that I find the order of obedience. Thus the metaphor of the law inscribed to consciousness suggests this duality of the sources of moral responsibility: both the Other and the self. Levinas goes on to suggest that it is this ambiguous duality of the self as both heteronomous and autonomous that makes ethics possible:

An ambivalence that is the exception and the subjectivity of what was, *without my knowledge*, inspired in me – to have received, whence we know not, that of which I am the author. The unheard-of saying is enigmatic in its an-archic response, in my responsibility for the other. This ambiguity within the subject is the trace of the infinite, alternately beginning and intermediary, the diachronic ambivalence that makes ethics possible. (ibid.)

Thus we can see that autonomy *is* part of what it is to be ethical for Levinas. When Levinas appears elsewhere to be rejecting autonomy, he is rejecting a particular notion of autonomy, associated with the idea of the self as an end-in-itself, for itself, bringing the Other within the sphere of rationality. Levinas specifically equates the state of being responsible as a type of autonomy, but autonomy envisioned as a state of ultimate concern for the Other and awareness of this concern:

Is freedom not that which is most remarkable in the mortal, finite, and interchangeable being who then raises himself to his unique identity as a human being? This is the meaning of the notion of election. To be aware of it, to be able to say 'I', is to be born to a new autonomy. (RB, pp. 192-93)

We have seen then that for Levinas, the ethical subject is both autonomous and heteronomous. Many interpreters of Levinas choose to focus almost exclusively on the understanding the subject as heteronomous, neglecting this strain of autonomy that is also to be found. I am keen to hold on to autonomy, but a sense of autonomy that is deepened following this reading of Levinas. If therefore I want to agree with most philosophers of education that one of the aims of education is the promotion of autonomy, what does Levinas's understanding of autonomy mean for how we conceive of this aim, so that it avoids the narrowly instrumentalist sense of ethics that Todd warns of?



## The Ideal of Autonomy Restated

If autonomy is seen as the self's awareness of its election, finding within itself the order of responsibility that comes from outside, this displaces the emphasis on rationality we considered in both Kant and in the standard theorisation of autonomy within philosophy of education. It is also distinct from the critiques of autonomy we have considered in Alexander's, Bonnett's and Cuypers's arguments, through the emphasis on heteronomy as sensibility and responsibility to the need and address of the Other that marks the beginning of my subjectivity. But what does this mean for how we could consider the possibility of autonomy as an educational ideal?

Perhaps Levinas leads us to consider that it is this state of 'being able to say "I"', aware of the uniqueness of my responsibility, that should be seen as characteristic of moral maturity. The autonomous self in this sense is aware that their subjectivity is predicated on the discourses and relationships into which they were called, in passivity, and aware of the choices they can make in responding to those addresses. None of this is to diminish rationality. Levinas sees rationality as part of the political order necessary for the protection of individuals. Levinas makes this clear in many different writings, for example in an interview explaining substitution, he clarifies the practical outworking of justice in relation to the state:

Judgment, comparison, are necessary... The State, general laws, are necessary. Institutions are necessary to carry out decisions. Every work of politics and justice is necessary. This order negates mercy, yet is called into being by this very mercy with a concern to recognize all the others who form the human multiplicity. This is the order that, perhaps, will be able to reveal its charitable roots in democracy. Justice and the just State constitute the forum enabling the existence of charity within the human multiplicity... As the issue of a certain limitation of charity, yet still grounded in love, the State can always review its law and its justice. Is this concern for reconsideration – for amelioration – not in effect the essence of democracy and of the liberal State, the sign of a mercy and charity that breathe there? An effort in view of an always better law. (*RB*, p. 230)

We see here that for Levinas, although subjectivity depends on asymmetric responsibility, for us to live in society with others means that we must live in, and continue to strive for, relations of equality and justice. It is therefore necessary to make comparisons, to make rational and political judgements. Yet this conception of

a justice and rationality founded in infinite responsibility means that the law can never be static: we, as autonomous and heteronomous subjects of such a state, must be striving for a better justice, and if the State is 'still grounded in love', its laws and justice are always under review. Education should therefore be aiming at the development of rationality, whilst also striving for autonomy in the sense of an awareness of the infinite demands of responsibility that are already there as a precondition of education. Such an idea of autonomy leads to a conception of citizenship in which I, an inhabitant of the State, seek to work towards a better justice, a state in which charity can breathe.

We might see Levinas as calling us to work in education towards an ideal of autonomy founded on a sensibility prior to rationality. Butler, drawing on Levinas's conception of ethical subjectivity, has suggested that we must conceive of autonomy in relation to our physical proximity to others. In *Precarious Life*, she suggests that our understanding of and struggle for autonomy must not privilege the rational at the expense of recognising our embodiment and the demands that others make on us in their physical vulnerability:

If I am struggling for autonomy, do I not also need to be struggling for something else as well, a conception of myself as invariably in community, impressed upon by others, impinging upon them as well, and in ways that are not fully in my control or clearly predictable? (Butler, 2006, p. 27)

This is surely an important insight to consider when thinking of autonomy as an educational aim. If we want to encourage students to recognise that they have autonomy, it is also necessary to encourage awareness that autonomy is only possible through the condition of existing in community, a community that makes demands on us, impresses on us and forms us in ways we cannot always control. Butler goes on to suggest:

Is there a way that we might struggle for autonomy in many spheres, yet also consider the demands that are imposed upon us by living in a world of beings who are, by definition, physically dependent on one another, physically vulnerable to one another? Is this not another way of imagining community, one in which we are alike only in having this condition separately and so in having in common a condition that cannot be thought without difference? (ibid.)

This passage highlights why it is so important that we think very carefully about the ideal of autonomy that we want to prioritise within education. The challenge of Levinas is to recognise that there are never autonomous subjects that are not already heteronomous. And heteronomy here means a condition of responsibility, of sensibility and susceptibility to the vulnerability of others. The challenge for educational theory, then, is not to turn away from the conception of rational autonomy developed by Dearden, Brighouse, White and others, but to recognise that we can only be autonomous because of the transcendent moment of responsibility, in which I am, prior to identity and rationality, always already in community and acted upon, yet at the same time with the possibility of acting upon and changing the situation in which I find myself. The story of autonomy that has so far been told within philosophy of education has not paid sufficient attention to the condition of subjectivity as subjection to the Other and the importance of sensibility as fundamental to both heteronomy and autonomy. Sensibility to the other's needs, in Levinas's view, takes priority over the universal principles of Kantian autonomy, which can become part of the closed circle of a totalising ontology. Before the fact of another's distress, the condition of infinite responsibility is clear: I can never be satisfied that I have done enough. In educating for autonomy, educationalists might hope to draw attention to the precariousness of life, my life and that of my neighbour, on which autonomy is founded. When I make choices, when I decide which rules to obey, I am doing so in a community of different and vulnerable others. In responding to the needs and addresses of others, I find that I am free, a unique subject, alone able to meet those particular needs.

If we want to allow students to become more autonomous, as is the aim of most liberal approaches to education, therefore, we need to enable them to become aware of the social discourses and relationships that have formed them uniquely, but also help them to see that while being acted upon, they are also acting, responding to those who address them in multiple situations, contexts and relations. Butler poses the following questions to the reader of *Precarious Life*: 'We are at once acted upon and acting, and our 'responsibility' lies in the juncture between the two. What can I do with the conditions that form me? What do they constrain me to do? What can I do to transform them?' (p. 16). These are questions that formal education should enable students to consider if they are to be autonomous. This requires careful thought on the

part of educators as to how, through the contents of the curriculum, different stories and histories are presented to young people, revealing something of the conditions that have formed them. Levinas himself attends to how allowing students to become aware of such conditions places responsibility on educators. In addressing the pressing question of how Jewish youth were to be taught about the history of Jews in Europe, and remembrance and mourning of the Shoah, Levinas, as Caygill point out, draws attention to the need for remembrance of victories against anti-Semitism, the defeat and punishment of Nazism, and the eventual victory in the Dreyfus affair. Caygill draws attention to how presenting the events of history in a particular light can have violent consequences for how young people come to understand their identity:

Is the politics of Zionism – before and after the Shoah – marked by an exclusively negative presentiment and memory, one made up of violence and injustice? If this is so, then the memory of murder will mark Jewish identity more than the eventual victory over the murderers. What political identity will emerge from being the victim of a Germany that had become a ‘metaphysics’ in Nazism, or a Russia that had become a ‘messianism’ with world socialism? The danger, barely intimated here, is that a wholly negative memory might so scar Jewish identity that its State, too, might embody a messianic metaphysics and abandon the prophetic mission of Israel to realise truth and justice and instead to recommence the cycle of violence and injustice. (Caygill, 2002, pp. 82-3)

Of course, this relates to the difficult and pressing question of the remembering of political horror at a particular moment when the identity of those involved in the remembrance was very much at stake. Yet we see here how if students are to become more attentive to the conditions of their heteronomy, there is a need for educators to reflect carefully upon how those conditions are presented in ways that do not serve to further reinforce cycles of violence and injustice. In an essay on Leon Brunschvicg in which he addresses the question of Zionist youth, and to which Caygill draws attention, Levinas states his hope ‘that today’s Jewish youth, when it sets off for a new spiritual and sometimes geographical horizon, does not simply shake the dust of the world it is leaving off its feet. There is gold in that dust.’ (*DF*, p. 45) Clearly many educators are already attentive to how gold and dust are intermingled in the histories, narratives and subject traditions they teach. The challenge is for them to consider how they are to hand over that gold to students in such a way that will enable

them to see how what gleams is part of a broader culture that has helped form them, and for which they are in the process of taking on responsibility.

As students are in the process of becoming subjects formed through subjection to social conditions, discourses and the needs of others who make concrete demands, there remains nevertheless the choice of how to respond to the condition of responsibility. Butler articulates this powerfully: 'The self at issue is clearly "formed" within a set of social conventions that raise the question whether a good life can be conducted within a bad one, and whether we might, in recrafting ourselves with and for another, participate in the remaking of social conditions' (Butler, 2005, pp. 134-35). This, I would argue, is the condition of autonomy that education should be striving for: a remaking of the self with and for others, and in doing so, participating in changing society to bring about a justice that is never satisfied.

How this might be done cannot be neatly prescribed, as much depends on the personal relationships at stake in the recrafting. I will, however, consider in Chapter 5 how this disturbs the way that religious education is currently theorised and taught in British schools. The approach to ethics that this implies is certainly not something that could be taught within moral education classes. It entails a different metaphysics to the dominant utilitarian ideologies underlying current education policies, and is not about particular interpersonal relationships, but about our relations to everything. We have seen in the preceding two chapters how Levinas challenges us to see education not in any instrumentalist sense, but as part of an ongoing condition of response and responsibility, to which he invites us to be vigilant, continuing both within and beyond formal education. Thus the idea that education should be the site from which rational, autonomous individuals emerge, as implied by some philosophers of education, is challenged by this richer notion of autonomy. This process of becoming more aware of the condition of heteronomy, as part of the process of becoming autonomous, is something that could never be finished. The challenge is to recognise this richer notion of autonomy that extends beyond rational capabilities and consider how as teachers we might lead students into an awareness of the conditions of their autonomy, intimately bound up with the recognition of the conditions of heteronomy. Recognising the condition of vulnerability and sensibility as the basis for autonomy has profound implications for our understanding of dialogue and community, which

we will consider further in relation to the idea of ‘the neighbour’ in Levinas’s presentation, in Chapter 6.

Although this conception of autonomy is not an ideal for which we can straightforwardly plan, it is already implied within education, even if it is not attended to and tends to be covered over in the more usual understanding of autonomy. To attend to this approach challenges us, as Morgan suggests, to recognise the way in which the heteronomous relation to the other in sensibility and vulnerability is ignored in standard accounts of autonomy, whereas it should be treated ‘prior or determinative or fundamental’ (Morgan, 2007, 90). It is easy to see why there would be resistance to this. Jacqueline Rose, in *The Last Resistance*, suggests that it is precisely because of our failure to admit of the condition of our subjectivity as vulnerability, and the responsibility we have to others, that we build walls and close down the possibility of a just and equal state. We seek to put up walls against others because we do not wish to see ourselves as vulnerable, our lives as precarious, our desires impinged upon by the demands of others. The challenge, then, is to allow our perspective on what autonomy might mean within education to be enriched by Levinas’s understanding, so that we come to see the Other as determinative and fundamental, and we relate to things, our neighbours differently, as the awareness of heteronomous responsibility deepens.

## **Chapter 4**

# **The Obliteration of Truth by Management: Badiou, Levinas and Economies of Education**

Let me review where we have got to in the argument of this thesis thus far. I began by laying out how Levinas conceives of teaching as the relation to the Other, in which the illusion of the self-sufficiency of the subject is exposed: I only exist as a subject through the address of the Other, 'bringing me more than I contain'. This teaching is never a completed process but always there, the trace of an immemorial past that is the condition through which I am a subject, subjected to the Other. I am passive in my state of being addressed by the Other, hostage to them, and it is only as one concerned for the Other, answering to the infinite, impossible demand they address to me, that I am. As a subject, I am therefore always already heteronomous, and it is only through the condition of that heteronomy that my consciousness, rationality and autonomy are possible. This understanding of teaching disturbs the emphasis placed by many educational theorists on the educational aim of the development of rational, autonomously-deliberating subjects. We have seen, however, that following Levinas leads us to an alternative, enriched understanding of the possibility of autonomy within education.

In this chapter, we will turn to consider a dominant thread of neoliberal discourse about education: the idea of education as the site where individuals with measurable skills, ready to enter waged work, are produced. Clearly, many who would argue for



autonomy as an aim might also be opposed to the way in which educational discourse is increasingly determined by the rhetoric of the market and the demands of business, but here I will argue that Levinas and Badiou provide us with a language and a way of thinking about education that offers a more provocative interruption of approaches that treat education as a service, which can be delivered and straightforwardly assessed for quality of provision. There has already been some consideration within philosophy of education of the way in which Levinas challenges trends towards the customerisation of education (Standish, 2005; Love, 2008). My aim here is to build on this through reading the challenge of Levinas we have considered in the preceding three chapters together with Badiou's critique of the way in which truth can become obliterated by management, since Badiou articulates a critique of neoliberalism and late capitalism in a direct manner that is, for historical reasons, lacking in Levinas's philosophy. In Badiou's account of subjectivity, he explicitly addresses the extension of the automatisms of capitalism in managerialist approaches and other techniques and rejects the potential of the politics of identity to provide a solution to this. Therefore his understanding of education and subjectivity is very pertinent to debates about the current dominance of managerialism, performativity and marketisation in education. Although, as I emphasised in Chapter 2, the philosophical projects of Levinas and Badiou are incommensurable in a sense, here I will show that Badiou's understanding of education, as only possible through grace, has similarities with Levinas's, and that both, read together, challenge the current dominance of particular ways of thinking about education. Both, I will argue, disrupt the closed thinking about the nature of education that is characteristic of an economy of exchange, and allow us to re-envision the very nature of educational practice as at odds with instrumentalist discourses. At a seminar entitled *Education and Neoliberalism in Crisis* that took place at Marxism 2009, held in London 2<sup>nd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> July,<sup>1</sup> a lecturer from London Metropolitan University argued that in order to resist the forces of a neoliberal hypercapitalism in education, theorists need to start with a defence of education, a consideration of what education is for. In this chapter, I show that this way of thinking about 'what is education *for*' reflects a utilitarian attitude towards education that is itself part of the problem. Here I suggest that we must start with thinking about what education *is*, what it *could* and *should* be. I have already outlined how Levinas

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.marxismfestival.org.uk/>, accessed 14.08.09



describes the scene of teaching. But how does Badiou describe education? The following gives some indication:

The only education is an education *by* truths. (*HI*, p. 14)

truth is a process, and not an illumination. In order to think it, one requires three concepts: one that names the subject at the point of declaration (*pistis* generally translated as 'faith,' but which is more appropriately rendered as 'conviction'); one that names the subject at the point of his conviction's militant address (*agapē*, generally translated as 'charity,' but more appropriately rendered as 'love'); lastly, one that names the subject according to the force of displacement conferred upon him through the assumption of the truth's procedure's *completed* character (*elpis*, generally translated as 'hope,' but more appropriately rendered as 'certainty'). (*SP*, p. 15)

We have already seen how theological terms, which sound strange, unfamiliar, scandalous even within contemporary educational theory, reverberate in Levinas's articulation of the nature of subjectivity and teaching. Here we also see that despite Badiou's critique of the religious piety he finds within Levinas's ethics, theological concepts - *pistis*, *agapē*, *elpis* - also assume fundamental significance in his presentation of subjectivity, fundamental to his conception of education. Education, for Badiou, is an education by truths, but, as we saw in Chapter 2, to think what truth is, he suggests we need the concepts 'conviction', 'love' and 'certainty'. In *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Badiou describes education as the process of arranging 'the forms of knowledge in such a way that truth may come to pierce a hole in them' (*HI*, p. 9). In this chapter, I will begin by exploring this conceptualisation of education as it relates to subjectivity, and consider how, read with Levinas, Badiou allows us to think beyond current frameworks that emphasise managerialism, performance and assessment. After considering these frameworks, I will outline some of the critiques that have been raised against them, for example from the Critical Theory and postcolonial discussion of exclusions and marginalisation and consider why Badiou's and Levinas's understandings of subjectivity are better able than these critiques to breach the intellectual closure represented by the approaches of managerialism and marketisation, leading us to an enriched understanding of the ethical and political possibilities of education. Let us start by turning to Badiou's *Saint Paul*.

## Why Paul? Weaving New Fabric out of a Ripped Yarn

Given that it is unusual to find reference to a religious saint within educational theory, why does *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* have significance for thinking about issues of managerialism and performativity? In arguably his most vivid exploration of subjectivity, Badiou shows how Christ's resurrection was for Paul an 'event.' Through the paradigmatic figure of Paul, Badiou considers how the event and the subject's fidelity to it emerge against a background state of a situation. Through comparing Paul's position with our current situation, Badiou reveals the ways in which late capitalism's exchange system is without capacity for truth. This is vital for our understanding of how Badiou's notion of education - as an education by truths - challenges the pedagogical problems related to the dominance of performativity and managerialism. Badiou allows us to consider what truth procedures and an idea of education following on from this might mean *within* a situation of education dominated by the discourses of the market, whereas this is not so directly addressed by Levinas. If these are my reasons for choosing, in this chapter, to question the dominant educational discourses through Badiou's examination of Paul, why does Badiou himself choose to examine Paul?

We have already explored Badiou's rejection of theology in Chapter 2, but it is worth emphasising that Badiou is not interested in Paul in relation to religion: 'For me, truth be told, Paul is not an apostle or a saint. I care nothing for the Good News he declares' (*SP*, p. 1). What he finds of interest is Paul the 'poet-thinker' reflecting upon what it is to become subject to an event that has ruptured his former ways of thinking and being, his epistles representing the struggle to work out what fidelity to that truth-event means for him and for all. Precisely *because* Paul's faith in the Christ-event is alien to Badiou himself, it allows Badiou to demonstrate that the meaning of the event may only be recognised as constituted by the subject for whom it becomes an event. Critchley puts this point clearly:

Badiou's choice of Paul as paradigm for the event is all the more compelling because his act of faith is so strange to the modern atheist ... The choice of Paul is intended to show the extreme subject-dependency of the event, that is, that the event is not reducible to the act of a subject, but that the event is only visible as such to the subject who acts in such a way as to pledge themselves to the event. (2005, p. 226)

It is precisely because the resurrection is a ‘fable’ for Badiou that it draws attention to the question of belief / faith, ‘or that which is presupposed beneath the word *pistis*’ (SP, p. 5). It is through exploring what *pistis* means for Paul that Badiou is able to demonstrate that the Pauline figure of the subject offers genuine revolutionary potential, a potential actualised through his refusal to submit to the order of the existing situation and, in fidelity to the event, his struggle to work and live for a new world. Why, however, does Badiou claim that Paul speaks particularly to our *contemporary* situation?

In ‘Paul: Our Contemporary’, Badiou provides his answer. The significance of Paul is found in his unprecedented gesture of ‘subtracting truth from a communitarian grasp, be that of a people, a city, an empire, a territory, or a social class’ (SP, p. 5). Truth as universal singularity for Badiou is manifest within a world of difference, but cuts through difference and claims of identity: ‘What matters, man or woman, Jew or Greek, slave or free man, is that differences *carry the universal that happens to them like a grace*’ (p. 106). Truth as universal singularity, entirely subjective, ruptures and necessitates a reappropriation of prevailing abstractions and particularist protests. For Paul, these were the legal abstractions of being a Roman citizen and the various identities asserted within that realm (even those using identities to protest against that realm). Badiou explains the prevailing abstraction that operates for us today in terms of the (false) universality of the rule of the market, subsuming within it even discourses that might appear to subvert it. Ray Brassier puts this point well:

Integrated global capitalism is a machine – and a machine is nothing other than an automated axiomatic system – but an astonishingly supple and adaptive one, singularized by its fluidity, its metamorphic plasticity. Whenever confronted by a limit or anomaly, capitalism has the wherewithal – the intelligence? – to invent a new axiom in order to incorporate the unexpected, constantly reconfiguring its parameters by adding a supplementary axiom through which it can continue expanding its own frontiers. (Brassier, 2004, p. 53)

For Badiou, the purely abstracted quantitative universality of monetary exchange is without potential for truths in the realm of political thinking:

No, we will not allow the rights of true-thought to have as their only instance monetarist free exchange and its mediocre political appendage,

capitalist-parliamentarianism, whose squalor is ever more poorly dissimulated behind the fine word 'democracy.' (SP, p. 7)

Badiou also describes the ways in which the politics of identity and particularist protests are subsumed under the universality of the market. His notion of truth as universal singularity aims at exposing what he sees as the deficiency of the cultural and historical relativisations of the question of truth. This he sees as part of the current state of the situation, comparable to the state of the situation for Paul. Truth, and thus thought, he argues, have been reduced 'to a linguistic form, judgment', which rejects this universalism. In this situation, Badiou argues that all forms of the cultural and historical relativisations of the question of truth operate under the abstraction of monetary exchange and the rule of the market, a process he describes as without truth:

What is the real unifying factor behind this attempt to promote the cultural virtue of oppressed subsets, this invocation of language in order to extol communitarian particularisms (which, besides language, always ultimately refer back to race, religion, or gender)? It is, evidently, monetary abstraction, whose false universality has absolutely no difficulty accommodating the kaleidoscope of communitarianisms. (SP, pp. 6-7)

The pervasiveness of the rule of the market in the current situation, comparable to Paul's, is all-encompassing. This rule of exchange, a system seeking to liquidate 'everything substantial according to a rule of universal exchangeability' appears to know no limits, to constantly redefine its boundaries:

there is an extension of the automatisms of capital, fulfilling one of Marx's inspired predictions: the world finally *configured*, but as a market, as a world-market. This configuration imposes the rule of an abstract homogenization. Everything that circulates falls under the unity of a count, while inversely, only what lets itself be counted in this way can circulate. (SP, pp. 9-10)

Badiou considers at length the way in which the abstract rule of circulation – 'only what counts will be counted: only what can be counted counts' - absorbs within itself the relativist ideology accompanying the process of fragmentation and differentiation of identity. The creation of differing identities 'creates a figure that provides a material for investment by the market' (p. 10). Indeed, the market requires the appearance of difference or non-equivalence so that the equivalence of exchange can constitute a process:

What inexhaustible potential for mercantile investments in this upsurge – taking the form of communities demanding recognition and so-called cultural singularities – of women, homosexuals, the disabled, Arabs! And these infinite combinations of predicative traits, what a god-send! Black homosexuals, disabled Serbs, Catholic pedophiles, moderate Muslims, married priests, ecologist yuppies, the submissive unemployed, prematurely aged youth! Each time, a social image authorizes new products, specialized magazines, improved shopping malls, ‘free’ radio stations ... Deleuze put it perfectly: capitalist deterritorialization requires a constant reterritorialization. (*SP*, p.10)

It is important to note that Badiou is not in any way ‘against’ difference or the creation of different identities. His criticism of the politics of identity relates to the ways in which it can lead to particularism, and the privileging of some groups over others. As discussed in Chapter 2, he clearly states that difference is the inevitable state of the world: ‘in the situation (call it: the world), *there are differences*. One can even maintain that there is nothing else.’ (p. 98) However, in relation to capitalism, his main contention is that the politics of identity feeds the system of global exchange on the one hand and thereby denies any possibility for the critique of the system on the other. As he asserts, the identities that are configured ‘never demand anything but the right to be exposed in the same way as others to the uniform prerogatives of the market.’ (p. 11)

This interplay of the homogenisation of the global market and the permanent process of the creation of (new) cultural and territorial identities is, for Badiou, without the potential for truths. Indeed, they are *hostile* to truth procedures and this is demonstrated by ‘nominal occlusions’:

The name ‘culture’ comes to obliterate that of ‘art.’ The word ‘technology’ obliterates the word ‘science.’ The word ‘management’ obliterates the word ‘politics.’ The word ‘sexuality’ obliterates love. The ‘culture-technology-management-sexuality’ system, which has the immense merit of being homogenous to the market, and all of whose terms designate a category of commercial presentation, constitutes the modern nominal occlusion of the ‘art-science-politics-love’ system, which identifies truth procedures typologically. (p. 12)

How then is it possible to step outside of this?

Badiou provides us with the example of Paul as a 'becoming subject' to truth and shows us how for Paul, the truth of the resurrection, experienced as a universal singularity, pierced through the prevailing abstractions (i.e. Roman Empire) and particularisms of his situation (i.e. Citizen, Jew, Gentile). A truth, according to Badiou, is not structural, axiomatic or legal. And significantly and controversially in the current situation in which the question of truth is relativised, Badiou argues that a truth cuts through every communitarian subset as a universality:

Truth is diagonal relative to every communitarian subset; it neither claims authority from, nor (this is obviously the most delicate point) constitutes any identity. It is offered to all, or addressed to everyone, without a condition of belonging being able to limit this offer, or this address. (*SP*, p. 14)

Conditions of identity clearly do exist, but, as Badiou states, truths are universal, belonging neither to any particularist subset of identity nor to the false universalism of economic exchange, and indeed interrupt these: 'ultimately it is a case of mobilizing a universal singularity both against the prevailing abstractions (legal then [in Paul's time], economic now), and against communitarian or particularist protest.' (ibid.) For Paul, prior conditions of particularist identity and the categories of knowledge were called into question by the universality of the Christ-event. This radical interruption is comparable to the way that Levinas describes the address of the Other, with which my subjectivity begins, as both prior to and suspending the conditions of identity, identity only emerging through processes of thematisation. For Badiou, this is why Paul can proclaim in Galatians 3: 28 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ.' The truth of the event and the practical working out of fidelity to that event as the process of subjectivity, displaces the subject from legal abstractions, particularisms of identity and the apparatus of opinion.

In our contemporary situation, truth as universal singularity cannot belong to the count of capitalism. The truth of the event is here 'entirely subjective' (*SP*, p. 14): for Paul, the truth of the resurrection is not established through what would have been for him the 'objective' categories of Jewish Law or Greek Logos. So, it is not Paul's message that Badiou sees as harbouring potential for delineating the nature of subjectivity, but rather Paul the subject who has experienced the Christ-event as

entirely subjective, exceeding what can be known within the current situation and yet universal in its appeal; an event that necessitates a radical break from within the structures of knowledge and identity that define existing situations. The emergence of Paul as subject to a demand that exceeds him in the Christ-event is only possible through his fidelity to that truth-procedure and through his hope as conviction that carries on in response to the infinite demand of the event. His exceptional singularity as an ethical subject is confirmed by his working for all, taken out of his self-sufficiency, by the event that has ruptured his former knowledge, understanding of identity, and way of being as *être-pour-soi*. In the event he is suspended, broken, disinterested and constituted in fidelity, love and hope to what has broken him, revealing the void of the current situation.

What does this mean for education? In *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Badiou links education to truths disrupting the established forms of knowledge and the state of the situation: 'education (save in its oppressive or perverted expressions) has never meant anything but this: to arrange the forms of knowledge in such a way that truth may come to pierce a hole in them' (*HI*, p. 9). He elaborates further: 'the only education is an education by truths' (p. 14). In other words, education references a process of subjectivity: it involves truth piercing through established forms of knowledges and the subject's subsequent reappropriation of those structures of knowledge in light of the event. Here, truth and, by implication, education, are processes rather than illuminations. A truth-procedure is the practical working out of what fidelity to the event means, a process both instituted in the event and yet still being worked out. It is fidelity to the event that is the process of subjectivity. The event itself is not something that can be known, but rather a gift, 'a kind of laicized grace' (Hallward, 2003, p. 115).

The subject is thus, for Badiou, 'constituted by evental grace' (*SP*, p. 63): the event and its truth cannot be contained within the rule of exchange and grace bursts asunder the economy of monetary exchange. The event is pure contingent gift and could neither be demanded nor result from my own action. It cannot be contained even by thought: 'Thought can be raised up from its powerlessness only through something that exceeds the order of thought' (pp. 84-5). In Chapter 1, we considered how Levinas describes subjectivity as also given, by the Other interrupting the closed

system of totality. Let us reconsider this point: Levinas argues that speech is a teaching, and that it 'first founds community by *giving*, by presenting the phenomenon as given; and it gives by thematizing' (TI, p. 98). The Other, who remains outside of my knowledge, *gives* me knowledge in their addressing me and looking for my response to their gift. Phenomena, experience as mediated by concepts, and language itself are given to me by their being offered to me in language, this offering, the saying at the same time exceeding language itself. The process of offering, through which I am taught, is what holds language in place, in that a common world is founded between me and the others, with objects set in place. While Badiou himself does not describe the event as a teaching, nevertheless, it can be compared to this condition of being addressed and made responsible that we have seen in Levinas's presentation. Read together, both ideas of subjectivity and education depend on the idea of a grace, a giving, that is beyond thematisation and comes to the subject from outside, rupturing and exposing the limitations of the ways knowledge and education are often thought of as deliverable and measurable.

It is important to note that Badiou's conception of truths emerging through the fidelity of the subject to event, in laicised grace, is not simply a secular colonisation of the Christian tradition in terms of the old 'true/false consciousness' debate in Marxism: 'Know the truth and the truth will set you free.' No: Paul is paradigmatic for Badiou because he illustrates the entirely subjective nature of the event as both a singularity and a universal. It is a singularity because it could only occur in particular circumstances, but universal in that an event is a potential for all. Badiou's discussion of Paul's articulation of the meaning of the event shows that truth-procedures involve the radical reassessment of our inherited forms of knowledge. Subjectivity - as the working out of the conditions of fidelity to an event - cannot simply be reduced to a true/false dichotomy. Neither is the event in Badiou's thinking the reification of some sort of epiphany, comparable to a road to Emmaus type experience. Let us remind ourselves of the ways that Badiou uses the terms 'event', 'fidelity' and 'truth', as already discussed briefly in Chapter 2. In *Ethics* (2001), Badiou provides a useful clarification of these terms:

The three major dimensions of a truth-process are as follows:



- the *event*, which brings to pass ‘something other’ than the situation, opinions, instituted knowledges; the event is a hazardous, unpredictable supplement, which vanishes as soon as it appears;
- the *fidelity*, which is the name of the process: it amounts to a sustained investigation of the situation, under the imperative of the event itself; it is an immanent and continuing break;
- the *truth* as such, that is, the multiple, internal to the situation, that the fidelity constructs, bit by bit; it is what the fidelity gathers together and produces. (*E*, pp. 67-8)

Badiou goes on to discuss the Haydn-event in classical music as a concrete example of these terms, useful for thinking through their relation to education. The event is ontologically situated: with the Haydn-event, the emergence of the classical style takes place in a situation governed by the baroque style. The event reveals the void at the heart of the current situation, a void that could not be perceived within the state of the situation prior to the event. Within the baroque style, the void, according to Badiou, was ‘the absence [*vide*] of a genuine conception of musical architectonics. The Haydn-event occurs as a kind of naming of this absence’ (*E*, p.68). The event then necessitates the reordering of the knowledges that have been disrupted by the event, which is the construction of truth. Following the Haydn-event, new musical knowledge was organised around the classical style. This reorganisation of knowledges subsequent to the event Badiou describes as the forcing of knowledges:

A truth punches a ‘hole’ in knowledges, it is heterogenous to them, but it is also the sole known source of new knowledges. We shall say that the truth *forces* knowledges. The verb *to force* indicates that since the power of a truth is that of a break, it is by violating established and circulating knowledges that a truth returns to the immediacy of the situation, or reworks that sort of portable encyclopaedia from which opinions, communications and sociality draw their meaning. (*E*, p. 70)

Although knowledges are forced by the event, and truth procedures take place through the reworking of new knowledges in the immediacy of the situation, the event itself is a grace that could not be forced. Responding to this gift by working out the conditions of fidelity to the event in which I become a subject, I am an agent of change. The subject emerges in the process of subjectivisation, the transformation that takes place through the actions of the individual in response to the event that took place, which was, for them, a gift. The investigation by the subject of the consequences of the event that occurred and disrupted the economy of exchange, as Feltham and Clemens note, ‘entails not only the active transformation of the situation

in which the event occurs but also the active transformation of the situation of the human being' (cited in Badiou, 2003c, p. 7). Thus education, in *this* view, entails this process of a transformation that necessarily breaks the closed totality of the economy of monetary exchange.

Within this conception, the subject needs to re-appropriate the meaning of the structures that have been disrupted by the truth procedure in 'not... but' articulation. This is to weave a new fabric out of the ripped yarn of the situation. Eric Santner describes this idea clearly:

human subjects undergo tears in the fabric of their lives, tears that, in principle, allow not simply for new choices of objects of desire, but rather for the radical restructuring of the coordinates of desire, for genuine changes of direction in life. Ethical consistency will mean something like the creation of new fabric *out of a tear*. (2005, p. 110)

This idea raises the question of the extent to which current neoliberal systems of education, woven with the yarns of economic managerialism, performativity and marketisation, might allow truth to break through and subjects to weave new fabrics with their lives. If education, according to Badiou's definition, involves the tearing and breaking of the current coordinates of the state of the situation, to what extent is this actually possible within the current environment?

### **The Economy of Exchange and the Marketisation and Customerisation of Education**

I'm only here [at school] to get good enough grades to go a good university, so that I can get a good job and earn decent money one day. And it's the teacher's job to make sure I get those grades.

These words, spoken to me by a 17 year-old student at a school in an affluent area of west London several years ago now, reflect the pervasiveness of the 'customerisation' of teaching and learning, stemming from the prevailing ideologies of marketisation and managerialism within education. This student saw his school as the provider of his education, reflected in the 'good grades' he desired that would enable him to achieve his career goal of 'earning decent money.' The application of business models leading to a managerialistic approach to the organisation of formal education,

with an emphasis on production-oriented service delivery is already well documented (Clarke, Gewirtz and McLaughlin, 2000; Apple, 2001; Preston, 2001; Bridges and Jonathan, 2003; Love, 2008). Even if such language sits uneasily with many, it is now commonplace for students or their parents to be described as the 'consumers' of education (the product), which is 'delivered' by the 'providers' (schools, universities). Bridges and Jonathan give several examples to demonstrate how in the UK, for example, the Labour government has shown just as great an enthusiasm for the application of market principles to education as its Tory predecessors:

extending rather than limiting parental choice of schools and the assessment and league tables that are supposed to inform such choice; enabling popular schools to expand; introducing student fees in the context of higher education, and showing some favor toward universities that wish to introduce differential charging; and taking on teachers' unions in a battle over performance-related pay. (Bridges and Jonathan, 2003, p. 126)

They describe the conditions for this 'marketisation' of education as the creation of diversity and choice and the placing of information and purchasing power in the hands of the 'consumer'. This process of the marketisation of education has been widely documented across North America and Britain, but is no longer solely a feature of the Anglo-American liberal conservatism that has held sway across North America, the UK and Australasia: 'regimes in such diverse political environments as Russia, Ethiopia and Vietnam are all sending government ministers and officials on courses in market economics and wrestling with the application of market principles to social policy' (Bridges and Jonathan, p. 127), and a number of international bodies, such as Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, International Monetary Fund and World Bank have all supported policies associated with managerialism. The application of market principles has led to the widespread dominance of economic managerialism within education. The term 'managerialism' is often used to imply the over-use of managers and management techniques, particularly in the public services. The notion depends on the idea that social, economic, political and cultural issues can be solved through better management, according to certain key principles of management technique, such as emphasis on target setting and achievement. Thus, management is seen to lead to value for money, efficiency and improved customer service.

Essential to managerialism, as Preston (2001) outlines, is the ability to meet quality / performance targets, as part of an 'Audit Society' or surveillance society (Foucault, 1991), in which all activities that can be measured and assessed ought to be measured and assessed. So, in Britain, schools routinely use 'value-added' scores, to assess the quality of a student's grades relative to the initial 'input' of the student's ability. As Preston writes, 'the accuracy of the word processor and the health of our school children are reduced to the same Ethic of Effectiveness, a Quality good with value-added components' (Preston, 2001, p. 348). The desire for information and norms against which to assess quality within education reflects a wider desire for information and feedback by which to judge the quality of service provision within society. In Britain, we have league table rankings of just about every 'service' in which 'consumer' choice is possible, from restaurants and hotels, to hospitals, schools and universities. Within British schools, the 'performance' of individual teachers is assessed through spreadsheets of their students' exam grades and observations by external examining bodies, while in some British schools, teachers are required to enter all their lesson plans into the school network so that the senior management can monitor that they are planned to meet the criteria of 'the model lesson'. All of these factors have a significant impact on the degree to which teachers feel they can exercise curricular autonomy and many feel stifled by this rhetoric of the market. I do not mean to imply that the practice of auditing in itself, through examination and other means of assessment, is necessarily forbidding. But the problem outlined by Preston and others is that audit as an idea overreaches its originally financial aim of ensuring that the money spent on education is delivering quality. Thus the process of audit becomes institutionalised as an entire principle of social organisation, leading to a state of constant surveillance within educational systems, to the extent that the very meaning of 'education' itself is covered over.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine the complex reasons lying behind the rise of managerialism, performativity and marketisation within education and how these relate to neoliberalism. Although a shared concern for value for money and efficiency might explain the application of market principles in different educational contexts, it is worth noting that educational theorists have outlined different ideological reasons underlying the rise of managerial models. In Britain, for example, studies of the use of the managerial model within public services by New Labour

have suggested that this can be linked to a desire to bring about greater democracy and inclusion. Jenny Ozga outlines this position:

New Labour's modernization of education, which uses managerialism as its vehicle... [seeks] to create an enterprising culture of the system, the institution and the self. It privileges waged work as the passport to inclusion, as well as the creation of wealth (common and individual) and in so doing it seeks to remove the need for separate recognition of the social and cultural work that education does, because that is now encompassed within programmes that promote achievement. (Ozga, 2000, pp. 222-23)

The emphasis here on the deployment of a managerial model of education in order to seek fuller inclusion differs from what Michael Apple sees as the ideology lying behind similar practices and discourses in the US, which he links to a shift to the right in education policy, guided by a neoliberal vision of the weak state:

What is private is necessarily good and what is public is necessarily bad. Public institutions such as schools are 'black holes' into which money is poured – and then seemingly disappears – but which do not provide anywhere near adequate results. For neoliberals, one form of rationality is more powerful than any other – economic rationality. Efficiency and an 'ethic' of cost-benefit analysis are the dominant norms. (Apple, 2001, p. 38)

However, both Apple's and Ozga's analyses of British and American systems of education – driven by the rhetoric of efficiency - imply a shared underlying aim of education: to prepare students for economic participation in society. Students are thus seen as human capital: 'The world is intensely competitive economically, and students – as future workers – must be given the requisite skills and dispositions to compete efficiently and effectively' (Apple, 2001, p. 38). The marketisation of education is seen by neoliberals, according to Apple, as necessary to prevent schools from 'sucking the financial life out of society' and ensuring that students as human capital are prepared for paid work. Crucial to this, Apple argues, is the idea of the 'consumer':

For neoliberals, the world in essence is a vast supermarket. 'Consumer choice' is the guarantor of democracy. In effect, education is seen as simply one more product like bread, cars, and television. By turning it over to the market through voucher and choice plans, education will be largely self-regulating. Thus, democracy is turned into consumption practices. (p. 39)

Underlying both these ideologies of managerialism is the view that education should be conceived instrumentally as a vehicle for participation in waged work and reproducing the current state of the situation, ruled by the principle of monetary exchange. This is achieved through the application of models of performativity and auditing in order to ensure that value for money is being achieved in the provision of education and that students emerge from education ready to earn capital. The various negative consequences of these processes have been documented as often leading to social and economic exclusion for those who do not succeed within the standardised testing system, while also leading to dissatisfaction among teachers and strangling thought. Fred Inglis writes of the emphasis on auditing within the managerial structures of British schools and universities:

The preposterous edifice of auditing, the mad rout of acronyms – HEFCE, TQM, OFSTED, TTA – blinds vision and stifles thought. Their most certain consequence is to make inquiry servile, knowledge instrumental, and, above all, to make all of us, teachers at whatever level, boring, exhausted and hating the job. (Inglis, 2000, p. 429)

Before we turn to examine how the notions of education and subjectivity offered by Levinas and Badiou can help us think outside of these prevailing ideologies and re-envision the potential of education, let us first briefly consider the standard responses to the management problematic from educational theorists working within the discourses of Critical Theory and, linked to this, the so-called ‘politics of identity’.

### **The Rule of the Market Under Attack**

Given the history of Critical Theory related to Marxism, albeit having travelled a significant distance from its roots, it is not surprising to find analyses of capitalist schooling as instruments of corporate power and domination coming from those working within this tradition. Within such approaches, there remains a commitment from Marxism to liberation from ‘false consciousness’, although not in the original Marxist formulation. In examining current hegemonic discourses within education, those who have been influenced by Critical Theory tend to have a transformative vision of the potential of an education that does not seek to reproduce existing inequalities and social divisions, but rather one that might empower groups who are

marginalised within society and thereby lead to greater democracy. This approach is exemplified in Apple's attack on US education policy. He places race at the centre of his attempted interruption of the hegemony of the marketisation of education, focusing on how existing schooling systems with their emphasis on standardised testing have the result of excluding those with least access to economic, social and cultural capital. His argument is for a politics of recognition that will challenge the inequalities that are reproduced within the current systems of education: it is 'not possible to be color-blind... only by noticing race can we challenge it... By placing race squarely in front of us,' we can challenge 'the state, the institutions of civil society, and ourselves as individuals to combat the legacy of inequality and injustice inherited from the past' (Apple, 2001, pp. 203-4). Education, in this view, could and should offer up a space for considering key issues involved in the politics of representation and diversity. Apple describes his critique as part of the politics of identity, but is critical of previous theorists of identity for not going far enough in attacking the conservative policies he describes as underlying the emphasis on marketisation and performativity within education:

This is partly an issue of the politics of 'identity,' and increasing attention has been paid over the past decade to questions of identity in education and cultural studies. However, one of the major failures of research on identity is its failure to adequately address the hegemonic politics of the right. As I have been at pains to show here and elsewhere, the conservative restoration has been more than a little successful in creating active subject positions that incorporate varied groups under the umbrella of a new hegemonic alliance. It has been able to engage in a politics inside and outside of education in which a fear of the racialized Other is connected to fears of nation, culture, control and decline – and to intensely personal fears about the future of one's children in an economy in crisis. (p. 211)

Critiques drawn from Critical Theory that include multiculturalist problematics in the interests of democracy have been put forward by several other prominent educational theorists, such as Carlos Torres (1998) and Henry Giroux (2001). Giroux has, however, stressed the importance of moving from critique to a discourse of hope: hope that there are ways of resisting the imposition of market and business models within education by emphasising the role that schools potentially play as spaces in which a false consciousness might be dissolved, leading to a positively formulated vision of democracy, a theme I will explore in the final chapter.

Another type of criticism that has been posed to the cultures of managerialism and marketisation in education comes from those theorists who emphasise the importance of personal well-being. John White is an exponent of such a position. In 'Education, the Market and the Nature of Personal Well-Being' (2005), he identifies a key aim of education as enabling students to lead personally fulfilling lives, capable of autonomous decision-making. He points out that the market *can* bring with it goods that help an individual to flourish:

The market, in opening up its own range of options to meet the consumer's autonomous preferences, reinforces the implicit messages about personal well-being that the educational bodies have been transmitting. (White, 2005, p. 100)

Here we see how the rule of the market can be linked with the ideal of autonomy that Levinas attacked, both operating under the same logic of the freedom and choice of the self-sufficient, rational subject / consumer. However, the values of the market must always, according to White, be seen 'in the light of wisdom already accumulated within the culture about what makes for a flourishing life' (p. 107). Thus, the rule of the market within education might be challenged if it does not tie in with what White describes as collective wisdom about what contributes to human flourishing.

Given then that there have already been critical responses to the rule of market within educational theory, what does Badiou, read with Levinas, add to our understanding? It is clear that we can recognise what Badiou describes as our current state of the situation in *Saint Paul* as also the state of the situation in education. Let us briefly remind ourselves of how Badiou summarised the state of our situation:

Our world is in no way as 'complex' as those who wish to ensure its perpetuation claim. It is even, in its broad outline, perfectly simple. On the one hand, there is an extension of the automatisms of capital, fulfilling one of Marx's inspired predictions: the world finally *configured*, but as a market, as a world-market ... On the other side, there is a process of fragmentation into closed identities, and the culturalist and relativist ideology that accompanies this fragmentation. (*SP*, p. 9-10)

It is easy to recognise this as the state of the situation in education, subsumed within the abstract homogenisation of monetary exchange through the imposition of market principles as I have outlined. Although Badiou does not extensively discuss



education policies, in an interview he does comment on how the French have followed British policy in applying the principles of the market to education which the State defends using the 'propaganda' of economic necessity:

every State uses propaganda to convince us that all the decisions they take are necessary. Let us take for instance the French government (although the same could be said about the British government). What is the French government saying to us? As the British government before, it is destroying public hospitals, public schools etc. It follows the British and follow it will ... It is explaining that specific policies *must* be implemented ... [T]hey claim that such policies are mandatory. But is this truly the case? It is his policy to say that it is necessary, it is the State policy. This is the government's way of situating this State policy in an economical context that is part of State decisions. (2003b, p. 189)

Badiou himself seems here to suggest that the politics of decision-making in education have been replaced by management: education policy comes to be defended by reference to economic 'necessity' rather than any other criteria. Thus, education is absorbed by the totalising rule of the market in order to facilitate its better functioning. The structures of management do not allow the question of truth into discussions about how formal education should be organised or about what education is or should be: all can only be explained with reference to economic necessity. In this way, the very meaning of education is obliterated by management, premised on an alleged requirement of necessity.

What becomes evident is that the responses from Critical Theory and secular liberalism as represented by White also fall within this state of necessity requiring managerial approaches that deny the discussion of truths - one that accepts identifications as the problem to be solved via access to the count of the market, a problem that can be rectified by 'proper' economic distributions and recognitions. We have already discussed how Badiou sees this situation and its allegedly critical contestations as without the potential for truths: 'The capitalist logic of the general equivalent and the identitarian and cultural logic of communities or minorities form an articulated whole' (*SP*, p. 11). Thus we might say that both the imposition of economic managerialism within education and the responses from Critical Theory form part of what Badiou has outlined as our contemporary situation.

What is particularly significant therefore about Badiou's challenge for education, and why he adds to the picture provided by Levinas, is that he alerts our attention to and steers us between the Scylla of economic management and the Charybdis of an identitarian politics that can lead to bigotry. As Peter Hallward argues:

We live in supremely reactionary times. Ours is a moment in which inventive politics has been replaced with economic management, in which the global market has emerged as the exclusive mechanism of social coordination. Ours is a moment in which effective alternatives to this mechanism find expression almost exclusively in the bigotries of culturally specified groups or identities, from ultranationalism in Germany and France to competing fundamentalisms in Israel and Algeria. Among contemporary thinkers, Badiou stands alone in the uncompromising rigor of his confrontation with these twin phenomena (Hallward, 2003, p. xxxvi)

Having shown that Badiou's outline of the state of the situation is a situation we recognise within current educational discourses and institutions, how does his notion of education as an education by truths, read with Levinas, help us to re-envision the nature of education in a way that can be mobilised against its current distortion? And what could this mean in practical terms?

### **Is Education Possible in Schools?**

In a recent interview with Oliver Feltham, Badiou makes the following comment upon the organisation of schooling:

Junior high school should be abolished: between eleven and fifteen years old all young people without exception should be integrated into productive work, with perhaps half the time spent studying, or a quarter. They will come back to full-time study once they are sixteen years old, having all acquired a tenacious 'worker' configuration. These later studies will not decide their future but provide an initiation to truth procedures. (Badiou, 2008, p. 138)

This point is worth pondering, particularly given that Badiou, like Levinas, has worked within institutions of education, as both school teacher and then as university lecturer and professor, throughout his career. Is Badiou serious, and if so, what would be the purpose of such a radical rethinking of education policy? Furthermore, how does this relate to Badiou's theorisation of the nature of education? Before we answer

these questions, we should note a criticism made by Nigel Blake and Jan Masschelein about the use of Critical Theory within educational theory:

Like its European counterparts, American critical pedagogy remains attached to a strongly instrumental and functional concept of educational practice, because it has not questioned the very concept of educational *praxis* itself but conceived it as an *instrument* for liberation or repression. Educational *praxis* still receives its meaning from the goal or end at which it should aim... Critical pedagogy thus formulates essentially and fundamentally a technological project. Its first step is the formulation of an ideal or utopia, which it uncritically supposes both possible and necessary. It thus remains itself subject to the same instrumental logic that it deplores at the heart of the capitalist system. (Blake and Masschelein, 2003, p. 50)

The same criticism could clearly be directed against the managerial model of education (aiming to reproduce the dominant hegemony and to maximise the creation of capital) and the personal well-being model (aiming at a utopian vision of human flourishing). I do not wish, in saying this, to disparage the ideal of a utopian inclusive democratic state, or the aim of enhancing students' flourishing. But Blake and Masschelein's criticism of critical pedagogy serves to highlight what is particularly distinctive in both Levinas's and Badiou's presentations: their anti-instrumentalism.

We might say that this idea of an education by truths is anti-instrumentalist at its core. The challenge of Badiou is therefore radical: to see structures of education not as sites for preparing people for work and economic participation, but rather as spaces of 'initiation into truth procedures', enabling the beginning of the processes of subjectivity, introducing students to past events and enabling them to begin to work out what fidelity to past events might mean. It would be impossible to plan for events within education. As Badiou states: 'it is of the essence of the event not to be preceded by any sign, and to catch us unawares with its grace' (*SP*, p. 111). However, even if we cannot wait for events to happen, we can still be working out the conditions of fidelity to past events: 'Many events, even very distant ones, still require us to be faithful to them. Thought does not wait, and it has never exhausted its reserve of power, unless it be for him who succumbs to the profound desire to conform, which is the path of death' (*ibid.*). Feltham provides a helpful example to illustrate this idea:

There are high-school teachers in France who try to educate students in line with the maxim inscribed over the front door of every public school: *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. These teachers are still trying to work out just what the French revolution is, and what it entails, in the field of education. The French revolution is not yet closed. *Aux armes citoyens!* The revolution is not yet over. (Feltham, 2008, p. 103)

Badiou's call for us to be faithful to past events in the current situation requires that the current situation be read in the light of such events, a reflection difficult to read given the invisible abstract universalisation of the market count to which education is accountable in contemporary situations.

Badiou's challenge is to recover education as a space for 'true-thought' that has not been colonised by the processes of managerialism and performativity, and therefore might allow us to think at a distance from and challenge these discourses. The current state of the situation in education does not count students as capable of thought. Hallward puts this point well:

Badiou's presumption is that by itself no ordinary situation ever really counts its members as thinking beings, i.e. in terms that respect those indefinable or inconsistent qualities that allow them to *think*, precisely – their immeasurable potential, their affirmative intensity, their infinite capacity for inspiration, and so on. Only rarely does it happen that people act not as objects evaluated by an employer, an educator or a friend, but as participants in one of the few possible fields in which pure affirmation is possible (in the fields of politics, art, science or love). For a truth to proceed in an employment situation, for instance, the criteria normally deployed to distinguish employers from employees, and profitable employees from unprofitable ones, would somehow have to be suspended in an affirmation or generic equality. (Hallward, 2004, p.7)

Badiou's radical proposal for sites of education divorced from preparing students for waged work might allow students to be initiated into truth-procedures and to recognise and respect them as thinking beings. There is not space here to consider what this would mean in terms of curriculum planning for this later stage of education that Badiou proposes. However his comments that truth procedures within the fields of art, politics, science and love have been obliterated by the 'culture-technology-management-sexuality' system might help us to think about what would and what would not be desirable when planning educational curricula (*SP*, p. 12).

Badiou's proposals are perhaps likely to be dismissed by most educational theorists as unworkable. Joseph Dunne explains clearly why it is so difficult to divorce education from utilitarian economic concerns, as Badiou seems to advocate:

The relationship between education and the economy has become a reciprocal one, with dependency running in both directions. On the one hand, the productiveness of the economy depends on the educational system for the supply of a skilled workforce (what is increasingly called 'human capital'). On the other hand, the educational system depends on a productive economy for funding on the scale which is required by a modern democratic system of schooling... This interlocking of education with the productive and economic sphere circumscribes the autonomy of education, rendering problematic the ideal of a humanistic education without utilitarian purpose. (Dunne, 2005, p. 149)

Given then that the rule of economic necessity dictates that it is highly unlikely that Badiou's proposal will come to pass, and there may be other reasons for opposition to his proposal, what can be done within the current state of the situation to enable institutions of formal education to become sites for the open and infinite possibilities for education suggested by Badiou and Levinas?

As a teacher, I feel challenged by Badiou to create situations for my students to encounter past events and consider what it would mean to be faithful to those events today. I want to allow them the opportunity to see the universality of the rule of the market as a situation without capacity for truths, and consider Badiou's challenge that the truth domains of art, science, politics and love are occluded and indeed obliterated by the culture-technology-management-sexuality system. And so, as I reflect upon my experience as a teacher, Badiou's writing speaks to me of the urgent need for the recovery of the following concepts within education: space and grace. I do not choose these terms because of a convenient assonance. 'Space' is a familiar term to be considering within education, while 'grace' sounds scandalous within prevailing secular discourses of education. Badiou, when read with Levinas, encourages us to think of both terms within education in quite specific ways, so that their meaning exceeds how the terms have been conventionally used. I will outline each only briefly, but both invite further consideration.

## *Space*

In discussing his own struggle against the State apparatus, Badiou suggests that in order to oppose the ever-extending forces of the global capitalist machine, what is needed is space within which to think and develop one's own methods of opposition: 'We need a strategy that allows us to create our own space, to develop our own strategies and political decisions. The question of space is fundamental to politics... And political independence is to be able to choose your own space' (2003b, p. 189). This can be compared with the way Levinas describes messianic politics interrupting the totalising logic of capitalist accumulation. In the Talmudic essay, 'The Nations and the Presence of Israel', Levinas describes 'rays of messianic light', which

break the spell of *having* by which being insists on being. They offer a glimpse at a future suspension of the heaping up, the amassing, the accumulation by which, for being-in the advent of its being – it is ever and again a question of its own being. A forgetting, a failing to recognize the other! A piling up, amassing, unending totalization of the objects and money that mark the rhythm and essential structure of the perseverance of being in its being. Its concrete modes: stock-piling and banks. (*TN*, p. 108)

In this late essay, we see Levinas also concerned at the totalising tendencies of capitalist accumulation, failing to attend to the other. But the messianic rays of light that interrupt this totalising logic provide a suspension and a space to be vigilant against this 'unending totalization'. What is needed, following our reading of Badiou and Levinas, is space to question the totalisation of the market. The current culture of economic managerialism, seeking to preserve and extend the capitalist hegemony, provides little opportunity for teachers to deviate from the accepted norms of discourse or space to question those norms. My teacher training followed, as is customary, an apprenticeship model, in which I learnt to make model lesson plans, to write schemes of work, and the overriding importance of assessment. All of these are important, but there was no space given to questioning or exploring the political implications and ideologies behind the systems into which we were being initiated. And in my subsequent experience of teaching, I have seen too little opportunity afforded to teachers to reflect upon their place within the prevailing abstractions that dominate educational discourses. In short, many teachers are initiated into and live in common places without space to access their potentials to engage in truth-processes.

In a sense, as we will explore in Chapter 7, teachers and students are already political subjects, but reading Badiou and Levinas leads me to consider that space within education needs to be further opened up for the possibility of thinking and acting that cannot be contained within logics derived from the economy of exchange, for both teachers and students. Each require space to think at a distance from the prevailing abstractions of the state of the situation, to consider, for example, the nature of past events and how these emerged against and disrupted previous situations and discourses. This is, therefore, not just a space that is required to think and reflect on one's practice, but rather space as the condition for the initiation into truth-procedures and for the possibility of live-thought. I will take up this question of how space relates to the possibility of distance from the State in my final chapter.

### *Grace*

Thought can be raised up from its powerlessness only through something that exceeds the order of thought. 'Grace' names the event as condition for an active thought. The condition is itself inevitably in excess of what it conditions. (*SP*, pp. 84-5)

The significance of grace within Badiou's conception of truth-procedures exposes the impoverishment of the type of thinking that can be contained, packaged, delivered and its quality assessed within current educational systems. Thought can only become powerful through what exceeds the nature of thought. This can be compared to the way that Levinas's understanding of subjectivity, as a condition in which I am taught through a relation that exceeds thought, also challenges the idea of an education system premised on the type of thinking that can be easily planned for, delivered and measured. The way in which the process of subjectivity begins in Badiou's thinking in response to the infinite demand of fidelity to the event, and in Levinas's thinking in response to the infinite demand of the Other, interrupts the idea that an education could ever be completed. A subject is always becoming in response to these demands, and this not understood in any developmental sense, but as the deepening awareness of the demand that fidelity or responsibility requires. The formation of subjectivity involves a fidelity to an event that continually overreaches the demands of a particular situation, a responsibility that can never be satisfied that it has done enough.

In 'Towards an Economy of Higher Education', Standish (2005) has argued that what is missing within the currently dominant economy of exchange is any understanding of the idea of an 'economy of excess'. What he describes as the 'economy of exchange,' currently operative within education, can be compared with how Badiou describes the state of the situation as dominated by the culture-technology-management-sexuality system, obliterating the truth domains of art-politics-science-love:

Instrumental reason and managerialism, as it were, stage-manage the curriculum in what have become its rituals of presentation, communication, assessment and accounting. The ideal product of such an education is a being with a portfolio of transferable skills, a being with a set of masks to put on, appropriately listed in a record of achievement and instantly recognisable to employers. (Standish, 2005, p. 63)

The instrumental commodification of education is a reflection of the commodification of all types of knowledge, experience and truth within an economy of exchange,<sup>2</sup> just as in Badiou's outline of late capitalism's appropriation of the world through its continual expansion of its frontiers:

Multiculturalism is thematised as a series of spectacles, foreign travel a collection of packaged experiences. Modern epistemology grasps knowledge, containing it in the concept, so that the knowledge economy can then turn it into a commodity fit for exchange. Criticism is the business of the student's crib, of book reviews in the Sunday papers, and of late night television arts magazines. The plundering and display divert attention from the vacuousness of the culture in which such ideas thrive ... Hence, the economy of exchange in education – that is, in 'the well-run university' – involves a 'bourgeois theatricalisation of standards, quality and excellence.' Practice becomes contrived and self-conscious, staged and presented as the object of accountability's gaze. (pp. 63-4)

In contrast, Standish develops the idea of an economy of excess, explored in relation to the significance of alterity and infinity for Levinas. Standish highlights the idea of the pure gift, which seems an impossibility in the economy of exchange. Despite the seeming impossibility of giving without any expectation of return, we should not give up on this idea, and the perfectionism implied here is the opposite of the closed

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<sup>2</sup> This exemplified in New Labour rhetoric of the importance of building a productive knowledge economy, with the UK as 'a world leader in.. turning that knowledge into new products and services', HM Treasury, *Science and Innovation Investment Framework 2004-2014*, July 2004, para 1.1, p. 5, cited in Callinicos, 2006, p. 12.



totality of the economy of exchange. In Levinas's account of the scene of teaching as depending upon an orientation of openness and infinite responsibility towards the Other, there is a sense of the impossible, unfulfillable demand that ruptures the closed circle of the economy of exchange. Such a teaching is never complete: the more I am taught, the more I realise how much I have yet to learn, my subject matter always exceeding my thought. As Standish highlights, however much the language of the economy of exchange hides this infinite possibility of grace, that grace, 'by its very nature, breaches those forms of closure' (p. 61).

Within an economy of excess, education takes on a different character from the closed totality of exchange in which all learning can be planned for and assessed, according to the dictate of managerial approaches. Rather than focusing on acquiring and developing transferable skills, acquiring subject matter content is best achieved in the *service* of what the subject seeks to know more of. In an economy of excess,

a subject of study comes to be understood as deepening and expanding the more one pursues it: as with the vista that extends as one ascends the mountainside, one progresses towards a greater understanding of what there is still to learn... There is nothing fanciful about this: this is the familiar experience of people who love their subjects; and against it so many aspects of current policy and practice, and of the prevailing discourse of teaching, learning and research methods, look palely narcissistic. (Standish, 2005, p. 52)

While limited by dominant logics, those moments of experiencing the subject under study deepening and extending, as Standish describes, *do* happen within education. I have seen my students, and indeed myself, become absorbed and changed by texts and ideas under study. The truth of a play, a novel, a song, *can* be manifest in the setting of formal education. Indeed, in the task of writing this thesis, within the setting of an institution of higher education, I am all too aware of the richness of Levinas's writing deepening the more I attend to it. This deepening is such that the demands of opening my educational home to welcome this reading, in the manner suggested by Todd (2008, pp. 180-83) are ever extending. And so I feel, as anyone writing about Levinas has surely likewise experienced, and as Levinas's son Michael describes, an 'enormous vertigo of incompleteness', that the reading I have engaged in has revealed further avenues for reflection and interrogation that I have not pursued and that therefore this work is incomplete. Michael Levinas describes how his father

helped him to see that it is, however, ‘necessary to accept incompleteness... He [Levinas] said to me, “Sometimes, the thing suffices in its incompleteness”’ (cited in Malka, 2006, p. 164). And it is to this attitude towards texts and subject disciplines that Levinas and Badiou lead us: to a sense that what we offer in our readings will necessarily be incomplete, as the teaching that takes place in an economy of excess could never be contained or neatly closed.

Badiou challenges his reader to consider the humility of the subject affected by such a manifested encounter:

Whoever is the subject of a truth ... knows that, in effect, he bears a treasure, that he is traversed by an infinite power. Whether or not this truth, so precarious, continues to deploy itself depends solely on his subjective weakness. Thus, one may justifiably say that he bears it only in an earthen vessel, day after day enduring the imperative – delicacy and subtle thought – to ensure that nothing shatters it. (*SP*, p. 54)

As teachers, if we are to see our role as helping students to encounter the infinite demands of truth-procedures and of responsibility, we are challenged to assist them to see the truths they encounter in their readings as precious, fragile and dependent on those who recognise past events as continuing to lead to new possibilities. All of this raises questions about curricular autonomy and the role of the teacher in these procedures, which demand further attention in the light of how these accounts of subjectivity offered by Badiou and Levinas challenge the dominance of current discourses. In the following chapter I will consider how this reading of education challenges the dominant approaches to religious education that I have encountered as a teacher, which treat religions as options, each of which can be rationally assessed and evaluated, in much the same way as the whole of education is treated as measurable in the neoliberal frameworks we have been considering here.

Both the event for Badiou and the scene of teaching for Levinas, as pure gifts, could never be bought or exchanged. Despite the tendency of managerialistic approaches to abduct truth from the proceedings of education, it is still there, even if occluded, in the subjectivity of those who *are* working out fidelity to past events in such a way that new events might take place. The challenge of both Badiou and Levinas is to be vigilant and resist the tendency of the law of the count and the principle of the

economy of exchange to foreclose the possibility of thought and the awareness of the conditions of responsibility, both our students' and our own. As educators we must be aware that the current configuration of education as measurable and deliverable misses the richness of education as the possible site of grace. The one who is educated is *not* learning only in order to get good enough grades to get a good job. They are also potentially in the process of becoming subjects to the demands of truths and responsibility, subjects therefore to infinite demands and, in the process, agents of change. As educationalists, we must not allow the seeming obliteration of truth and grace by management to hide this.

## Chapter 5

### A Religious Education Otherwise?

Having considered how reading Levinas disturbs the dominance of a certain understanding of autonomy, predicated on rational argumentation and evaluation, enabling us to choose the best way of life, and how he and Badiou expose the limitations of the way in which education is conceived in managerialist discourses that place excessive emphasis on deliverable, assessable outcomes, let us now turn to consider what this interruption might mean in practical terms. Having been a teacher of religious education in a variety of secondary schools for the last eight years, whilst simultaneously reading Levinas's writings on the nature of both teaching and religion, I have become increasingly aware of how the theoretical frameworks of this subject discipline reflect the dominance of the ideal of rational autonomy leading the individual to be able to make choices about the best way of life, and the trend towards measurable, attainable outcomes. The overwhelming majority of my time as a teacher has been spent preparing students to sit public exams, so that students' performances can be graded and the 'skills' they have acquired compared. The content of these exams is derived from an underlying philosophy that emphasises the importance of RE as linked to students being able to develop the 'skills' of critical thinking and analysis, and so ultimately to be able decide for themselves, as rational autonomous agents, which religions, if any, offer truth.

The following questions, taken from GCSE Religious Studies examinations (OCR and AQA syllabuses) exemplify this approach:<sup>1</sup>

‘God is not real.’ Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. (5 marks)

‘Religious experiences prove that God exists.’ Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. (5 marks)

‘Suffering makes it impossible to believe in God.’ Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. (5 marks)

‘A Christian life is a good life, but it is too strict for most people.’ Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. (5 marks)

These questions, from the ‘Philosophy and Ethics’ strand of the RE GCSE syllabus, the most popular option for both GCSE and A Level courses, reflect the turn towards the use of critical thinking, philosophy of religion and ethics within the study of religion in British schools. Is there a God? Why is there suffering in the world? What is religious truth based on? These are the sorts of questions that the majority of young people will encounter when studying RE in secondary schools in Britain today. The ways in which religious education specifications thematise religion as the object of a type of critical thinking, whose truth or falsity can be described and known through rational argumentation and evaluation is a symptom of the educational ideologies we have described as problematic in the preceding two chapters. In this chapter I will suggest that reading Levinas and Badiou helps us to consider how it might be possible to teach this subject otherwise, but let us begin by turning to consider the current place of the subject in the British curriculum, with particular reference to the subject at GCSE and A Level.

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<sup>1</sup> These examples are mostly of what are termed AO3 questions, sources AQA Religious Studies, Specification B, Unit 1, June 2003, May 2007, May 2008; OCR Religious Studies A (World Religions) specimen paper 2003. Some examples of AO1 and AO2 questions, from AQA Specification B, Unit 4, June 2008, are:

- Give two types of evidence on which scientific truth is based. (2 marks)
- Explain religious attitudes towards cloning. You should refer to the beliefs and teachings from either two religions or two Christian denominations in your answer. (8 marks)
- Explain two reasons why some religious people support hospices. (4 marks)
- Explain two reasons why some religious people use caffeine. (4 marks)

## Religious Education in Britain today: A Snapshot

In British schools, religious education is a compulsory subject, part of the basic curriculum. Although RE has no prescribed syllabus, QCA<sup>2</sup> has set out what schools should aim to achieve in RE:

RE aims to help pupils to: acquire and develop knowledge and understanding of Christianity and other principal religions represented in Great Britain; develop an understanding of the influence of beliefs, values and traditions on individuals, communities, society and cultures; develop the ability to make reasoned and informed judgments about religious and moral issues with reference to principal religions represented in Great Britain; enhance their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development; develop positive attitudes towards other people, respecting their right to hold different religious beliefs from their own, and towards living in a society of diverse religions (SCAA, 1994a, p. 3).

Religious Education actively promotes the values of truth, justice, respect for all and care of the environment (QCA, 2004, p. 8).

All sound worthy aims. Who would not want to see the values of 'truth, justice and respect for all' promoted? However the emphasis has shifted profoundly towards the specific target of 'developing the ability to make reasoned and informed judgments about religious and moral issues'. This has meant that philosophy of religion and ethics have enjoyed new found prominence, with many religious education departments re-branding themselves departments of 'Religion and Philosophy' or 'Philosophy, Ethics and Religion,' and schools increasingly opting for philosophy of religion and ethics papers within the RE GCSE and A level. This has led to the increased popularity of the subject: it is among the fastest growing subjects in the curriculum at both GCSE and A level.<sup>3</sup> The result of this is that students emerge from their religious education able to give a reasoned justification of whether or not there is a God, whether or not drugs should be legalised, whether or not women should be allowed abortion on demand, but with little awareness of the complex, rich and troubling histories and myths at the heart of religious traditions, and therefore a distorted picture of what 'being religious' means.

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<sup>2</sup> The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, formerly SCAA

<sup>3</sup> In 2008, for example, it was the fastest growing subject at GCSE. See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2598289/GCSEs-Pupils-taking-fewer-exams.html> for a discussion of recent trends in GCSE exam entries in relation to this, and also <http://www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/qca-05-2176-re-report.pdf>, both accessed 14.08.09

Why is it that RE has moved in this direction? The answer to this lies not just with the ideologies of education we have considered in the previous two chapters, but also with the history of the subject itself. Let us examine briefly the different aims of RE that have dominated the profession in Britain, and in particular the phenomenological and critical realist models that have been most prominent in recent years<sup>4</sup>, before we consider how Levinas's writing exposes some of the limitations of these approaches.

### **The Phenomenological Approach**

The move away from confessional religious education began in the mid 1960s, with the rise of Religious Studies in universities. Ninian Smart set up a major curriculum development project on RE in 1969, which was to be very influential on the way religious education has been taught in this country since. The project pioneered what has become termed the 'phenomenological approach'<sup>5</sup>, which it described thus:

the aim of religious education [is] the promotion of understanding. It uses the tools of scholarship in order to enter into an empathetic experience of the faith of individuals and groups. It does not seek to promote any one religious viewpoint but it recognizes that the study of religion must transcend the purely informative (Schools Council 1971, 21 quoted in Jackson, 1997, p. 8).

Whereas with the confessional model, the aim was subtle indoctrination into Christianity, phenomenological religious education reacted strongly against this: six world faiths were to be studied, and tolerance of difference and empathy replaced nurture into Christianity as the aim of religious education. The phenomenological model is dialogical in that it places importance on collaboration with religious communities in constructing curricula for study and in the preparation of texts for

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<sup>4</sup> I am aware that these are not the only two approaches to RE that have been used in Britain in recent years, but I am focusing on these two as those that appear to have had the most significant impact upon the way the subject has been taught. For a comprehensive overview of alternative approaches, see Stern 2006.

<sup>5</sup> 'Phenomenological' is here being used in a technical sense, distinct from the way Levinas describes his own indebtedness to phenomenology.

analysis. As Robert Jackson, a prominent researcher influenced by the phenomenological school<sup>6</sup> describes:

A key element in a 'conversational' view of religious education is a clear acknowledgement that voices from inside the traditions . . . need to be taken very seriously . . . Members of religious groups and traditions are not simply 'objects of study', but are writers of resource material, pupils, colleagues, parents and others whose voices are relevant to the processes of education. (Jackson, 1997, p. 134)

This emphasis on conversation in the phenomenological model is rooted in the ideal of interfaith dialogue. This is not surprising since Smart, the pioneer of this method in religious education, was also a researcher and practitioner of interfaith dialogue within religious studies.

However, there are problems with this approach. While tolerance and empathy are desirable aims in many respects, one might object to empathy as suggesting a transparency of the other person, the view that we could understand her and her religious lifeworld. Jackson himself questions whether empathy is possible, although he does retain it as a fundamental aim of RE: 'The interpretive approach reveals how problematic empathy is, and how easy it is to convince ourselves that we have empathized with another when in reality we have not done so' (Jackson, 1997, p. 46). Todd, in a chapter examining empathy in *Learning from the Other* outlines how, following Levinas, empathy is limited in the possibilities it offers for ethical relationality in education (Todd, 2003a, pp. 43-63). While openness to the otherness of different religious traditions and ways of life *is* desirable, we cannot see empathy as an aim in itself, since it implies a problematic transparency of the Other.

Tolerance is more desirable. Levinas draws attention to the notion of tolerance as 'bearing the weight of others', an idea which can be traced to the etymology of 'tolerance' in the Latin 'tolerare', which implies bearing, or supporting, as well as suffering or enduring (DF, p. 173). The more common understanding of tolerance

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<sup>6</sup> The religious education label with which Robert Jackson is most usually associated is 'interpretive pedagogy', which has much in common with the phenomenological approach, but places great emphasis on interpretation. Julian Stern summarises the approach thus: 'In religious terms, the focus is on internal diversity as well as religious plurality, and on a serious engagement with the layering of religion, culture and philosophy. In terms of learners, the key skill is interpretation' (Stern, 2006, p.77).



implies a sense of putting up with a belief or practice that you find disagreeable. This is more problematic, since it implies an attitude of superiority in the one who is tolerant, placing the self above the other. Is this what we should be aiming for in religious education? On one level, it would be a step forward if we could achieve greater tolerance, yet clarification is needed on what tolerance means and how this could be promoted within RE, for example in how tolerance might be related to concepts of hospitality.

In recent years, the emphasis has shifted away from these models within the phenomenological school to the 'critical realist' model, which has led to the rise of philosophy of religion and ethics within the subject. To this let us now turn.

### **The Critical Realist Model**

The pioneer of the critical realist approach is Andrew Wright, whose *Religious Education in the Secondary School: Prospects for Religious Literacy* (1993) has had a great influence in shifting the emphasis of the subject away from phenomenological approaches towards the evaluation of the truth claims of the different religious traditions. In this, Wright criticised the phenomenological approach, described as 'liberal religious education', as leading to relativisation of religious truth through the implication that all religions offer an equally valid path to truth:

the truth claims of individual religions were seen as private issues that were not to be dealt with in the classroom, ignoring the reality that at the heart of each of the religions being dealt with lies a claim to the possession of the unique and ultimate truth about reality. Thus... the demand for openness and neutrality became in reality a claim that each, in its own way, offers an equally valid path to truth. Yet this is precisely what the world's faiths, in their own self-understanding as opposed to the liberal interpretation, do not claim. (Wright, 1993, p. 40)

Wright therefore advocated what he terms a 'critical realist' model, in which students are enabled to critique different truth claims, to evaluate autonomously and rationally the best way to live one's life, to question, as he writes, 'are the things that I am ultimately concerned about in harmony with the way reality ultimately is? Or am I living a life grounded in a false illusion?' (p. 45). He went on to propose an agenda for RE, which has largely been taken up in British secondary schools:

To enable our pupils to reach a depth of understanding of the moral and social dilemmas before humanity we must allow them to see what these dilemmas and questions look like in the light of the question of ultimate truth. (ibid.)

The aim of this approach is for each student to be able to evaluate for herself what Wright calls questions of 'ultimate truth', on a range of religious and ethical issues.

Philip Barnes, in *Taking Religious Difference Seriously*, has also insisted on the importance of religious education grappling with the truth claims that he sees lying at the heart of the different religious traditions. For him, religions are essentially concerned with 'ultimate truths', which he sees as mostly mutually exclusive:

the religions endorse different and well-nigh contradictory systems of belief. For example, Christians believe that the divine is personal and Trinitarian in form; Jews and Muslims deny this, although they agree that God is personal<sup>7</sup>, in contrast with Advaita Vedanta Hindus, who believe that the divine is an impersonal principle . . . It is not just that the religions differ, it is that they differ in fundamental ways. Each version of religion, moreover, believes its beliefs and doctrines faithfully represent and picture the true nature of reality. Simply, the different religions each claim to be true, while affirming different doctrinal systems of belief. (Barnes, 2009, p. 40)

Although Barnes does not here use the term 'critical realism', we can see the same emphasis on RE evaluating questions of 'ultimate truth', which he sees as the most important aspect of each religious tradition. Barnes, like Wright, is keen that RE avoids imposing any 'relativist religious identity that follows from liberal theological assumptions' (p. 42). The agenda he proposes for the subject is that rather than looking for similarities between religious traditions, religious educators must take religious difference seriously, and to do this means 'to acknowledge the importance of beliefs and doctrines' (ibid.). He argues that religions themselves see belief as central, and that any responsible education must acknowledge this. The task therefore for religious educators is to enable students to evaluate, differentiate and choose, using rational argumentation, between the truth claims made by the different religions. He suggests that liberal religious education has attended to the question of

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<sup>7</sup> This leads me to wonder about his sources of information on this. The long history of Jewish atheism is well documented. Žižek, in *Violence*, points out that 'according to some polls, Israelis are the most atheistic nation in the world: around 70 per cent of them do not believe in any kind of divinity' (2009, p.105).

truth by the tacit assumption that there is truth in all religious traditions, but he is critical of such an approach, arguing that 'such a conviction actually fails both to engage critically with the issue of truth in religion and to equip pupils with knowledge and skills to enable them to choose wisely from the rich variety of religious options that are culturally available' (p.50). He concludes that what is needed for students to be able to choose wisely, is an element of philosophy within RE, 'for it is this discipline that traditionally provides the skills and the framework for assessing and evaluating competing truth claims' (ibid.), an ideology we can see as largely similar to that underlying the emphasis on rational autonomy we considered earlier.

Wright has, in more recent work, developed a more nuanced form of critical realism, 'read in partnership with alteristic forms of post-modernity' (Wright, 2004, p.63), including Levinas. In *Religion, Education and Post-Modernity* he sets out an agenda for a critical realist pedagogy, emphasising that critical realism should approach the question of reality in a way that admits of some degree of subjective truth and keen to avoid the perception that critical realism could claim any kind of view from nowhere. He outlines the following as the basic truth claims affirmed by critical realism:

That there is a reality existing independently of our ability to perceive or understand it; that our comprehension of the world must take account of our own subjective engagement with reality; and that the complexity of reality requires an appropriate level of critical thinking and self-criticism if we are to penetrate beneath surface appearances. (p. 55)

Wright acknowledges a sense of the contingency in the critical realist approach to the knowledge we could gain of such reality, and argues that together with some postmodernist approaches, this critical realist approach suggests 'a way of progressing towards deeper and more truthful knowledge of ourselves, and of our place in the ultimate order-of-things' (p. 64). This phrasing, and the way that the language of 'ultimate truth' and 'ultimate reality' continues to reverberate through *Religion, Education and Post-Modernity* suggests that this modified version of critical realism, still holds to the belief that there *is* an ultimate order of things, and this informs Wright's understanding of religion.

It is interesting to see how Wright has worked Levinas into his more recent work on critical religious education. Central to his interpretation of Levinas is his

understanding of alterity as a form of mystery, which might lead to a re/enchantment with the world and of theology. He sees the centrality of goodness in Levinas's writing as the recognition of the difference and space between I and Other. Wright describes this sense of goodness in Levinas's writing as follows:

Goodness, Levinas insists, is dependent on my learning to gaze into the face of the Other and recognising the space between us as a sacred space. True morality lies not in the overcoming of difference, but rather in the celebratory vision of difference. (p. 50)

What Wright seems to find most significant in Levinas is this idea of difference, 'Levinas's vision of humanity flourishing through its celebratory encounters with alterity, difference and otherness' (ibid.). He goes on to describe alterity as foundational - the 'bed-rock' for both Levinas and Derrida's thinking about 'the order-of-things' (p. 123). Wright links this to a virtue of receptivity, which he describes as one of four virtues within a critical realist framework (the others being honesty, wisdom and truthfulness). This more nuanced version of critical reason provides a corrective to the excessive dominance of instrumental critical reasoning in Wright's earlier model. However, it is open to debate whether the main insight that we should draw from Levinas in relation to RE is this idea of a 'celebration of difference and alterity'. Whilst this balances earlier versions of critical realism that sought to bring all within the sphere of *my* understanding, the problem with emphasising this celebration of difference, and seeing goodness as the recognition of difference, is that it appears to neutralise both the infinite demand out of which subjectivity emerges, and the troubling nature of the confrontation with the Other, that Levinas emphasises, which is far from a celebration of difference.

Wright's interpretation is easily open to the critique of interpretations of Levinas, offered by Badiou. We have already discussed the grounds of Badiou's critique, but in relation to Wright's reading, it is worth noting that a celebration of difference is insufficient as an ethical grounding for religious education, or as any kind of educational aim. It seems, as Badiou writes, to be a given that in any classroom, or in any curriculum, students will encounter difference, because that is just what there is. What is missing then in this reading of Levinas is the traumatic and troubling nature of the approach and demand of the Other, which stands at a significant distance from the 'celebratory encounters with difference' that Wright advocates, and the curvature

of intersubjective space, which is what Levinas calls 'the very presence of God' (*TI*, p. 291), signifying the Other as my teacher, always higher than me, and to whom I am always already responsible.

This outline of ideology shifts within religious education has been necessarily brief, focusing on the two most dominant trajectories of thinking within the subject. Before turning to Levinas, let us address briefly the impact critical realism has had on the way that the subject is taught and assessed.

### **The Influence of Critical Realism**

Although Wright's more recent work has been open to Levinasian perspectives on alterity, the clarity and persuasive force of his earlier work, emphasising the instrumentality of reason allowing us to autonomously grasp, or at least to move towards, 'ultimate truth', has had a significant influence on RE curricula at secondary level. Because of this desire inherent within critical realism to enable students to evaluate what constitutes ultimate truth, RE teachers spend much of their time teaching GCSE students to evaluate the various arguments that have been put forward by philosophers for and against the existence of God, the ethical debates surrounding such issues as abortion, voluntary euthanasia and genetic engineering, and students are assessed on their ability to present rational arguments to the sort of questions listed at the beginning of the paper, carefully supported by examples and evidence.

I do not wish to suggest that students should not learn to employ critical reasoning within religious education. I would agree with Wright that some examination of religious truth claims enables students to stand in critical engagement with the religious and non-religious traditions into which they have been raised. But there must be greater attention given to the situatedness of the critical reasoner, to the fact that they stand within a certain epistemic community with its own assumptions. Although his later work does pay more attention to this (Wright, 2004, p. 54), exam specifications, influenced by his earlier work, pay insufficient attention to this emphasis. Furthermore, I would argue that the critical realist model indoctrinates students into a distorted understanding of what it is to be religious. The centrality of the philosophy of religion within RE leads students to view being religious as

believing that certain statements of knowledge are true. Thus exam specifications, determining to a large extent the content of the curriculum, for the reasons we considered in the previous chapter, tend to present religion in too simplistic terms as assent to religious propositions. So, for example, students might read in a GCSE textbook:

If you belong to a religion, you are likely to say that your religion is true. It must be true for you, otherwise you would not believe in it. As you believe your religion to be true, you would probably go on to say that it possesses the truth... There are, however, many religions and most people believe that only one view can be right. This means that religions often make conflicting claims to the truth. Buddhism says there is no God. Other religions believe that God exists. (Beck and Warden, 2002, p. 6)

As a discussion of religious truth, this is inadequate and a picture of religious truth that many members of religious traditions would disagree with.

A further problem, tangentially related to the dominance of the critical realist model, is the way contemporary issues with only marginal relevance to religious traditions have become established on RE curricula. This is related to the desire to see some aspects of PSHE and citizenship covered within RE. However, the examination of such issues borrows critical realist methodologies and is linked to the emphasis within critical realism that students should evaluate religious responses to ethical issues. Given the decline in the percentage of the British population involved with organised religion, this might be linked to a desire on the part of religious educators to make the issues covered in RE seem relevant to students. The result is that we have such topics in the GCSE syllabus as 'drug abuse' and 'the media.' The following are some GCSE questions from the 'drug abuse' topic:

Explain two reasons why some religious people use caffeine. (4 marks)

How might the teachings of the religion you have studied affect the attitudes of believers towards drug taking in sport? (10 marks)<sup>8</sup>

Admittedly, it is of fundamental importance that students learn about the effects and debates surrounding drug abuse, but given that no religious tradition that I am aware of prioritises the issue of performance-enhancing drugs in sport in its moral teachings,

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<sup>8</sup> Both questions from AQA Religious Studies, Specification B, Unit 3, June 2008.

should it be a topic that we should devote time and attention to within *religious* education? Surely trying to make the subject appealing through focusing on contemporary issues in this way undermines the integrity of the subject?

Although this overview of current approaches dominating RE at GCSE and A Level has been brief, we can see that conceptually and ideologically, the subject is not fulfilling its potential. Indeed OFSTED, in a recent report on the state of RE in British schools, has pointed out problems with the dominance of philosophy of religion and ethics within current RE teaching:

RE cannot ignore the social reality of religion. Most of the issues in the RE curriculum for secondary pupils have been about ethical or philosophical matters, such as arguments about the existence of God, or debates, from a religious perspective, about medical ethics or the environment. It has been unusual to find questions about religion's role in society, changing patterns of religion in the local community, or the rise and decline of religious practice. It now needs to embrace the study of religion and society. (OFSTED 2007/ 070045)

As a teacher of RE, over the last eight years, I have seen in my school and others, a very decisive shift towards the philosophy of religion in RE, reflected in the exam syllabuses at GCSE and A Level and this OFSTED report indicates that I am not alone in my unease at the growing dominance of philosophical approaches towards religion within the subject.

There is work to be done, therefore, in clarifying the aims of RE. At the heart of both the phenomenological and critical realist models is a desire to avoid religious indoctrination. The phenomenological model was a reaction against indoctrination within the confessional form of RE, in which students were instructed in the Christian faith, rooted in study of the Bible. The critical realist model likewise aims against indoctrination, by enabling students to develop rational autonomy through critique and evaluation. It also aims against the form of indoctrination that Wright sees in operation in the phenomenological approach: a liberal religious indoctrination that approaches all religions as reducible to a shared set of social structures, beliefs and practices, such as rites of passage and founding myths. Clearly, this desire to protect students against religious indoctrination is important; however, it is my contention that the dominant critical realist model nevertheless might lead to a more subtle

indoctrination into students seeing religious and ethical truths as matters open to evaluation and justification.

So, following on from our readings of Levinas and Badiou, is it possible to think about how this subject might be conceived otherwise?

### **A Religious Education Otherwise?**

In a recent sixth form lesson, I asked students who were thinking of applying for theology at university to write down and then discuss their understanding of what the subject involved. One of my students, himself a Christian, described Theology as, ‘the study of the transcendent and inarticulable Good, through examining how people from different religious traditions and faith communities have responded to and attempted to articulate this transcendent.’ Whilst I would disagree with his definition of the subject, given that many students of theology do not believe there to be any ‘transcendent and inarticulable Good’, his definition of what the study of theology involves nevertheless highlights the currently impoverished state of RE in contrast.

The problem perhaps lies with the disputed concept of ‘religion’ itself. While the phenomenological model is problematic, paying insufficient attention to the otherness and opacity of the object of study, and tending to domesticate all religions as broadly similar, the critical realist model distorts religion into a matter of true v. false knowledge (the question of what really is the ‘ultimate truth’, to use Wright’s terminology). Both approaches tend to imply a transparency of religion, either in terms of religious belief or in terms of its lifeworlds, belying the complexity of religiosity, which as my student suggested, for those within religious traditions is founded on what is beyond articulation and, arguably, rational justification.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to develop a definition of religion that could be used as a basis for clarifying the aims of religious education: the very attempt to give a definition of religion is itself contested, with interpreters of religion offering



variously lexical, empirical and stipulative theories of religion.<sup>9</sup> What I wish to do in the remainder of this chapter is to consider the ways in which Levinas's descriptions of transcendence, illeity and religion, related to his use of theological terminology that we considered earlier, open up an alternative approach to religious education that breaches the intellectual closure of the phenomenological and critical realist approaches. Before doing so, it is worth noting that the claims that Barnes and Wright, in his earlier work, make about religions being primarily about truth claims is not an understanding of religion that would find ready acceptance amongst many theorists of religion. Consider, for example, William James's classic definition of religion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James acknowledges that any definition of religion will be oversimplified, because of the very diversity of religiosity, but seems to point towards ritual as at one level the most basic element of religion: 'Worship and sacrifice, procedures for working on the dispositions of the deity, theology and ceremony and ecclesiastical organization, are the essentials of religion in the institutional sense' (James, 2002, p. 28). On another level, James sees the basis of religion as relating to what he describes as 'the inner dispositions of man': 'his conscience, his deserts, his helplessness, his incompleteness' (ibid.). Friedrich Schleiermacher would likewise have disagreed with the idea of religion primarily pertaining to truth claims, doctrines and beliefs, describing religion as 'the sensibility and taste for the infinite' (1996, p.23). Whilst both Schleiermacher and James's 'definitions' are problematic – it is, as we have seen in Chapter 1, problematic to posit 'feeling' as in some way separable from the frameworks of language and interpretation within which we make sense of feeling – they nevertheless highlight that the claim that religion is a matter of 'ultimate truth' that could be established through rational evaluation is already contested. Wright himself acknowledges this and does admittedly want in his later work to stress that 'ultimate truth' / 'ultimate reality' might always lie beyond rational argument. But his theological critique of Schleiermacher does seem to posit a theory of truth at odds with what Levinas will wish to claim, for example arguing that 'the major problem for romantic forms of

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Tweed highlights the lack of agreement amongst sociologists of religion as to the nature of religion: "It was once a tactic of students of religion," Jonathan Z. Smith argued..., "to cite the appendix of James H. Leuba's *Psychological Study of Religion* (1912), which lists more than fifty definitions of religion, to demonstrate that the effort clearly to define religion in short compass is a hopeless task." (Tweed, 2006, p. 41)

theology was how to distinguish between subjective experience of the inner self and objective experience of the divine' (2004, p. 77).

Let us turn then to consider how Levinas allows us to conceive of the possibility of a religious education otherwise. I will outline how Levinas's understanding of religion is in some ways (uncharacteristically) similar to Žižek's writing on the nature of belief, and show how their understandings provide a stark contrast and challenge to the implicit theorisations of religion at the heart of the currently dominant models of RE we have considered.

In his essay on Franz Rosenzweig in *Difficult Freedom*, Levinas describes religion as follows:

Religion, before being a confession, is the very pulsation of life in which God enters into a relationship with Man, and Man with the World. Religion, like the web of life, is anterior to the philosopher's totality.

Life or religion is simultaneously posterior and anterior to philosophy and reason, reason itself appearing as a moment in life. I insist on this fact: unity is not here the formal unity of God, Man and the World, which would be produced beneath the gaze that adds something even as it reduces, through the synthetic thought of a philosopher who remains outside the elements. (*DF*, p. 189)

Here we see that for Levinas, religion, and indeed life itself, might be concerned with truth, but if so, this is a very different notion of truth than the idea of an 'ultimate truth' glimpsed through rational argument as in the critical realist model. For Levinas, religion concerns the transcendent in 'relationship with Man, and Man with the World.' The transcendent, as Levinas insists, does *not* fall within the philosopher's totality, and therefore the attempt to study religion through critical evaluation of its truth or falsity, appears nonsensical. We have seen how examination specifications in RE are much preoccupied with attempts to prove or disprove God's existence. Yet this misses the very nature of religion, as emphasised by Levinas. Peperzak puts this point well:

We must understand that God is neither a phenomenon nor a being, and that neither God nor human subjectivity, freedom nor speaking can be understood as themes or topics of thematization. They precede any possible logic, as not only Levinas, but the entire tradition of Western

onto-theology knew. A God that could be proven would certainly not be Godly enough to be “*Il*.” He would fit our categories – and thus, perhaps, give us satisfaction – but this would disqualify him from being God. (Peperzak, 1997, p. 107)

In ‘God and Philosophy,’ Levinas suggests that God is what bursts open the ‘omnipotence of the *logos*, of the *logos* of system and simultaneity’ and instead manifests ‘transcendence as signification, and signification as the signification of an order given to subjectivity before any statement: a pure one-for-the-other.’ (*GM*, p. 78) Levinas makes it clear that God, like the infinitude of the ethical demand, cannot be thematised and indeed is revealed as what could never be brought to presence in language in illeity. The term illeity, as Michael B. Smith points out, is linked to the Latin demonstrative *ille*, *illa*, *illud* and as with this pronoun, designates something brought to my attention, yet at a distance. Smith suggests that this term is then used by Levinas in contrast with the notion of reciprocity in a dialogical relationship:

The dialogical relationship brings with it elements that make it an inadequate structure for transcendence because of the reciprocity and eventual play of gratitude and psychological interplay to which both parties of the dialogue are open. The otherness of the other person is preserved and his or her stature as ‘greater than myself’ safeguarded only if the face of the other is ‘in the trace’ of illeity. (Smith, 2005, p. 89)

This dense concept of illeity is used by Levinas to invoke the refusal of reciprocity and totalisation and means that slipping into a relation of equality is impossible, which means that neither I, nor my neighbour, nor the third party, can be reduced to essence or identity. Levinas uses theological terms to signify the transcendence bound up in the concept of illeity:

This saying belongs to the very glory of which it bears witness. This way for the order to come from I know not where, this coming that is not a recalling, is not the return of a present modified or aged into a past, this non-phenomenality of the order which, beyond representation affects me unbeknownst to myself, ‘slipping into me like a thief,’ we have called *illeity*....

The word God is an overwhelming semantic event that subdues the subversion worked by illeity. (*OB*, pp. 150-51)

Illeity is what allows the word God to be said, without allowing it to be thematised: ‘Illeity overflows both cognition and the enigma through which the Infinite leaves a

trace in cognition... It makes the word God be pronounced, without letting "divinity" be said... It is non-thematizable' (p. 162).

The idea of religion is used by Levinas to describe both religion, in a prophetic mode of voice, and the condition of subjectivity: responding to the need of my neighbour who approaches me yet remains ultimately unknowable in illeity, bearing the trace of God in the appeal they present to me to respond to their address. We will explore this further in the following chapter in relation to the idea of the neighbour. This is in some senses not so far from my sixth form student's implicit understanding of religion in his description of theology as the study of 'the transcendent and inarticulable Good'. This view of religion is ethical at its core and as such cannot be reduced to knowledge. Levinas states: 'Ethics is not the corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision' (*DF*, p. 17) and 'The ethical order does not prepare us for the Divinity; it is the very accession to the Divinity. All the rest is a dream' (p. 102).

The magnitude of the ethical demand from which my subjectivity, and any sense of divinity, emerges is rather more than any 'celebratory encounter with alterity' as in Wright's interpretation of Levinas. Towards the end of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes how subjectivity depends upon the 'curvature of the intersubjective space', in which the Other, higher than me, addresses me and looks for my response. This Levinas describes as 'perhaps the very presence of God' (*TI*, p. 291). Strikingly, and at odds with Wright's interpretation, the possibility of violence and hostility are always there within the approach in which the divinity is to be found, emphasising the difficulty implicit in all our relations with alterity:

The true essence of man is presented in his face, in which he is infinitely other than a violence like unto mine, opposed to mine and hostile, already at grips with mine in a historical world where we participate in the same system. He arrests and paralyzes my violence by his call (*TI*, pp. 290-91).

Thus we can see that for Levinas, religion stands beyond ontology and cannot be grasped by comprehension. He is critical of those versions of theology that treat transcendence or God as something that could be *understood* conceptually, as is the implicit theorisation of God within critical realist frameworks:

Theology imprudently treats the idea of the relation between God and the creature in terms of ontology. It presupposes the logical privilege of

totality, as a concept adequate to being ... But transcendence precisely refuses totality, does not lend itself to a view that would encompass it from outside. Every 'comprehension' of transcendence leaves the transcendent outside ... The transcendent is what cannot be encompassed. This is an essential precision of the notion of transcendence, utilizing no theological notion. (*TI*, p, 293)

Current models of RE, emphasising the importance of conceptual transparency and the ability to logically, autonomously evaluate and critique the rival truth claims of religions are already misconstruing the nature of religion, if we follow Levinas.

Perhaps surprisingly, given his critique of Levinas elsewhere, Žižek's theorization of belief also emphasises that it cannot be reduced to knowledge. In *How to Read Lacan*, he suggests that it is characteristic of both religious fundamentalists and religious sceptics to reduce religious truths to knowledge: 'For both liberal cynics and religious fundamentalists, religious statements are quasi-empirical statements of direct knowledge: fundamentalists accept them as such, while sceptical cynics mock them.' (Žižek, 2006, p. 117) This view, for Žižek, misses the groundless nature of belief, which is about commitment and ethical to its core, an ethics that cannot be reduced to or justified in terms of knowledge:

A fundamentalist does not believe, he knows it directly. Both liberal-sceptical cynics and fundamentalists share a basic feature: the loss of the ability to believe, in the proper sense of the term. What is unthinkable for them is the groundless decision that installs all authentic beliefs, a decision that cannot be based on a chain of reasonings, on positive knowledge. Think of Anne Frank... in a true act of *credo quia absurdum*, asserted her belief that there is a divine spark of goodness in every human being, no matter how depraved he or she is. This statement does not concern facts, it is posited as a pure ethical axiom... At its most fundamental, authentic belief does not concern facts, but gives expression to an unconditional ethical commitment. (ibid.)

Current models of RE, assessing students ability to present a reasoned and justified evaluation of religion are then missing the point, and indeed *encouraging* a polarisation between 'liberal-sceptical cynics', Richard Dawkins as their figurehead, and more conservative forms of religion, which do see religion as something that can be known.

This is, as I have emphasised, not to say that critical reason is not an important aspect of RE. As Grace Jantzen writes in her critique of the dominance of an objective notion of critical reasoning in the philosophy of religion

Critical reason need not be replaced by a sardine can opener, but it could very beneficially be supplemented by ... a wider understanding of reason that includes sensitivity and attentiveness, well-trained intuition and discernment, creative imagination, and lateral as well as linear thinking. (Jantzen, 1998, p. 69)

The problem lies not only, however, with the dominance of critical reason, but with the language of 'ultimate truth' and 'ultimate reality' that resounds throughout the critical realist frameworks. Why is 'truth' not enough? A better language of truth might be Badiou's, in which the subjective truth of religion as a universal singularity would imply the ethical commitment to a truth that ruptures former knowledges and forces new knowledges to be produced.<sup>10</sup> Truth here, as in the Levinasian notion of the transcendent, exceeds any knowledge of the current situation and refuses to be contained by conceptual thinking or rational argument: it is experienced as radically subjective. This is, admittedly, rather a different notion of truth than that of critical realism: what is true, for Levinas, is not just a matter of personal taste or whim, but of being called to account by the Other and all the others.

Given these alternative theorisations of the nature of religion opened up by our reading of Levinas, is it possible to say what religious education is, or rather, what it should be today? Perhaps surprisingly, the recent OFSTED report on RE offers some clues as to a possible way forward:

RE cannot ignore its role in fostering community cohesion and in educating for diversity. This goal has never been far from good RE teaching but the current changes in society give this renewed urgency. Pupils have opinions, attitudes, feelings, prejudices and stereotypes. Developing respect for the commitments of others while retaining the right to question, criticise and evaluate different viewpoints is not just an academic exercise: it involves creating opportunities for children and young people to meet those with different viewpoints. They need to grasp

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<sup>10</sup> Although Badiou is resistant to seeing events as taking place within the realm of religion, it is possible to criticise him on this, since clearly those within religious traditions do constitute certain occurrences as 'events' and might perceive themselves as working out the conditions of fidelity to that event in their lives. Badiou's own work on St. Paul further supports this idea that it is possible to understand religion in this way.

how powerful religion is in people's lives. RE should engage pupils' feelings and emotions, as well as their intellect. (OFSTED 2007/ 070045)

An understanding of religion as founded on an ethical sensibility that is irreducible to knowledge, following Levinas, might provide a conceptual framework to support these recommendations of the OFSTED report. There is an urgent need, therefore, for more work to be done to tidy up the conceptual confusion about what the study of religion should involve in British schools and why it is so important, given the rise of religious fundamentalisms and violent reactions to them in Britain and elsewhere. As OFSTED suggests, students need to meet those with different viewpoints, to engage with them in a dialogue of openness in order to work together for a more just community.

It may be that the discussion has been proceeding at what some may find too abstract a level. Let me take a more personal turn at this point in order to reflect on ways in which some of these matters are shown in relief in my own experience. The school where I have taught for the last five years has students from predominantly secular liberal and Christian backgrounds, with a sizeable minority of Jewish, Muslim and Hindu students. Last term a colleague invited a number of girls from a Muslim school in East London to spend the day with students at our school, for them to compare their experiences of studying religion and discuss the different ways in which religion impacts on their experiences of being teenagers in London. This was the first time that this had happened in our school, and such experiences are comparatively rare.<sup>11</sup> But it provided a valuable opportunity to meet and engage with those from a very different background, and for our students, from largely secular households, it provided an invaluable insight into what it might be like to live as a teenager whose religious identity is very important to them. Yet clearly within school communities themselves, difference is also *already* there, as are the opportunities for attending to this. In my school, one of the design technology teachers, a prominent figure within his local synagogue, was invited to a Year 7 RE class to explain how and why he prayed. Significantly, when asked why he prayed, he replied, 'I do not pray because I believe in God. I do this because my father did it, and his father, and his father before him. Doing this is for me holy because it carries on that tradition.'

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<sup>11</sup> Julian Stern also outlines a helpful approach to facilitating face-to-face dialogue between those of different faith traditions (2006, p. 33).

His own description here of his place within his religious tradition seems at odds with what Wright and Barnes identify as the essence of religion as being about truth claims. For this teacher, his religiosity appears to me to be bound up in an ethical demand he has experienced to carry on the tradition of his father, and his religious subjectivity seems clearly dependent upon the performance of ritual. Prayer is usually presented in RE textbooks as primarily a conversation between the religious believer and God, but in the experience of this teacher, it is the performance of the ritual, which has come to him as a gift from the outside, from those that he loved, that comes to define his beliefs about the ritual.

In addition to having more opportunities to meet with those of different religious traditions, what is also required is a different attitude towards texts, artefacts, and other objects of study. I did not take RE for GCSE or A level – the phenomenological model in operation at the time was unattractive – but pursued literary subjects. In my experience of these subjects at school, we were not encouraged to engage with each text as closed and complete enough for a thoroughgoing critique, but rather read each in such a way that new meanings would emerge as we turned back to them again and again, so that I would never have claimed to have fully understood or exhausted the meaning of *King Lear*, for example. This is in striking contrast with the demands of the RE A level, in which students have so many philosophers of religion and ethics that they need to cover, that they are able to spend barely a week on each philosopher (little more than two hours of teaching), in which time they are expected to understand his or her theory and be able to critique it. Thus teachers have little time to give students primary texts to engage with, and if they do, there is barely time to read them, and most students rely on potted versions of philosophers from textbooks. Thus, I always feel slightly shocked when I encounter a Year 13 student who can declare ‘Descartes’s crap’, not having read anything by Descartes, but feels that since all that he needs to know of Descartes to get an A is to be able to critique the ontological argument for the existence of God, he is justified in making such a claim. It is not the student’s fault that he feels satisfied and qualified with such a superficial knowledge; it is rather the fault of those who have devised such assessment criteria, and who have focused on the overriding importance on measurable outcomes within education as a whole, as explored in the previous chapter, that in RE have had the



effect of privileging the ability to set up a philosopher's argument only to be able to knock it down again.

What would lead to a better religious literacy and engagement with the stories at the heart of each religious tradition might therefore be a more literary approach, where the aim is a deep insight into the different levels at which stories can be read and interpreted, rather than an approach focused on mastery and critical points-scoring. In a recent article in *The Guardian*, Andrew Motion expressed his regret that students are unable to enter into our literary heritage because of their lack of understanding of the Bible and other religious texts. Although not describing himself as religious, he nevertheless sees these stories as enormously important to our cultural heritage. When asked why he is so passionate about the importance of children studying the Bible, he replied:

Simply because it is full of terrific stories. These stories are primitive. They speak to us about human nature and the recurring patterns of human behaviour ... Many of my students stumble into vaguely mythological stories in their writing. When I ask them anything about the Bible, they frankly don't know.... I do think there is a real problem with the education system that has allowed these great stories to disappear, to fade out of the diet everyone gets at school. It's an essential piece of cultural luggage.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps what I am advocating, therefore, is a move in the subject more towards the approach of theology as it has more usually been taught within liberal universities, involving a multidisciplinary approach: philosophical, yes, but also involving literary, historical, sociological and psychological approaches towards the study of religion, but with more emphasis given to attentiveness to the subjects of study, rather than just setting every belief or truth up as an object of critique.

I do not wish to suggest that students should not study philosophy of religion and ethics. Indeed, I would wish to see philosophy established as a discrete subject of study alongside religious education on the curriculum. But, the complexity of the *social* reality of religion is something that must be prioritised within RE, in a way that is not supported by the current framework. Indeed, as the OFSTED report tells of the need to encourage respect for others, we might extend this to speak of the need to

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<sup>12</sup> From <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2009/feb/17/bible-religion-andrew-motion>, accessed 17.02.09

teach 'a religion for adults' (*DF*, pp. 11-24) in the sense that Levinas describes, a religion of humanity that 'does not mystify the notion of the divine; it realizes that the language of God arises for us when we are aware of our responsibility to others and of the demands of justice' (Morgan, 2007, p. 345). Indeed, teaching RE in the way that I am suggesting might itself be seen as the practice of this type of religiosity. I do not, unlike Wright, think it possible to insist on a virtue of receptivity, in either teachers or students. But if assessment criteria and the content of the curriculum were to be changed, it might be possible to move away from the dominance of seeing religion as primarily concerned with philosophical questions about the existence of God. It is true that not all members of religious traditions would agree with my alternative theorisation of religion: it is a trait of fundamentalism, both atheist and religious, to see religious truth as knowledge that can be argued for and justified. But it is vital that religious education *also* presents a picture of religion otherwise, a religion for adults. Such a religious education might constitute an interruption of approaches to education that have the effect of instrumentalising the curriculum towards goals that can become totalising, as we have considered in the preceding chapters. It would also lead to a different understanding of community, challenging the individualism underlying the current framework of RE with its emphasis on the individual making rational, autonomous choices between the religions they study and emerging from their education with demonstrable skills of argumentation and critique. A religious education otherwise would also lead us to see how our attitudes towards religion are always in a sense heteronomously constructed, but enable us to take responsibility for how we engage in dialogue with those who hold radically different positions from our own, so that we do not build walls to further separate us, as has increasingly been the case within the context of extending processes of global securitization following 9/11. To this significant question of interfaith dialogue, and the possibility of a community in education that might seek to resist the building of new walls, let us now turn.

## Chapter 6

# And Who is my Neighbour? Community, Dialogue and the Commandment to Love

On 11 September 2001 the Twin Towers were hit. Twelve years earlier, on 9 November 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. That date heralded 'the happy '90s,' the Francis Fukuyama dream of the 'end of history' – the belief that liberal democracy had, in principle, won; that the search was over; that the advent of a global historical world community lurked just around the corner; that the obstacles to this ultra-Hollywood happy ending were merely empirical and contingent (local pockets of resistance where the leaders did not yet grasp that their time was up). In contrast, 9/11 is the main symbol of the end of the Clintonite happy '90s. This is the era in which new walls emerge everywhere, between Israel and the West Bank, around the European Union, on the US-Mexico border. The rise of the populist New Right is just the most prominent example of the urge to raise new walls. (Žižek, 2009, pp. 86-7)

This urge to raise new walls that Žižek describes as symptomatic of our current situation, he sees as arising from the dialectics of globalisation leading to segregation, with new walls raised most fundamentally between 'those included in the sphere of (relative) economic prosperity and those excluded from it' (ibid.). This can be seen in the way that, following the global financial crisis of 08/09, instability and fear have led to the desire to build walls to protect 'our' economic interests, Gordon Brown's slogan 'British jobs for British workers' exemplifying this attitude.<sup>1</sup> Following on from this diagnosis, Žižek poses a stark challenge: 'to tear down the *true* wall, not the Immigration Department one,

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/7097837.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7097837.stm), accessed on 12.08.09

but the socio-economic one: to change society so that people will no longer desperately try to escape their own world.' (p. 88) Yet I find Žižek's economic explanation and solution too simplistic. His own example of the wall between Israel and the West Bank cannot be explained purely in economic terms, but must also be seen as bound up with memories and histories of violence and the failure to face up to conditions of vulnerability, the 'attempt to promote omnipotence as the answer to historical pain' (Rose, 2007, pp. 55-6).

How might it be possible to tear down the walls Žižek speaks of? It is beyond the scope of this thesis to address all the walls Žižek mentions. In any case, I would argue that to attempt to think through how we might better attend to the possibility of communities without such walls, it is necessary to consider *specific* 'walls' that can pose barriers to community and dialogue. Žižek frequently draws attention to religion as a wall, pointing to lack of understanding between secular liberals and Christians, Jews and Muslims in particular as examples of the failure of multiculturalist tolerance (for example, 2009, p. 89 ff.; 2006, p. 105 ff.):

in our secular, choice-based societies, people who maintain a substantial religious belonging are in a subordinate position. Even if they are allowed to maintain their belief, this belief is 'tolerated' as their idiosyncratic personal choice or opinion. The moment they present it publicly as what it is for them, say a matter of substantial belonging, they are accused of 'fundamentalism'. What this means is that the 'subject of free choice' in the Western 'tolerant' multicultural sense can emerge only as the result of the extremely *violent* process of being torn out of a particular lifeworld, of being cut off from one's roots. (Žižek, 2009, p. 124)

In the previous chapter, we saw how the privileging of a certain conception of rational autonomy can lead to lack of understanding of what it is to *be* religious. It is easy to see that the attitude of critique and evaluation towards religious beliefs advocated by critical realism could be linked with suspicion of forms of religion that do not conform within the secular choice-based societies that Žižek speaks of. In this chapter, I propose to examine how Levinas's understanding of 'the neighbour' helps us to reflect on the possibilities for community and dialogue in education, referring to interreligious dialogue in particular.



The question of interfaith dialogue is an important consideration for those working within education to attend to, since, post 9/11, religious difference has been for many a particularly worrying example of the kind of wall that Žižek referred to, and the need for dialogue and more peaceful understandings between members of religious traditions more pressing. I will take as my starting point for considering dialogue recent moves towards greater understanding between the Abrahamic faiths exemplified in the interfaith initiative opened up by *A Common Word*, since this has been seen as marking an important step forward in interreligious dialogue.<sup>2</sup> *A Common Word* is the name that has been given to an open letter sent on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2007 to the Pope, the patriarchs of the Orthodox churches and leaders of all the larger Christian denominations, from 138 prominent Muslim scholars and leaders, representing every significant branch of Islam.

### **A Common Word Between Us and You**

‘The most important [commandment],’ answered Jesus, ‘is this: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” The second is this: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no commandment greater than these.’ (Mark 12: 28-30)

The contemporary significance of this most famous ethical imperative can be seen in the *Common Word* letter, which emphasised the ideal of loving the neighbour as ‘a common word between us and you’. This open letter was written in response to Pope Benedict XVI’s Regensburg address of September 13<sup>th</sup> 2006, ‘Faith, Reason and The University’, which cited an inflammatory passage from the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus: ‘Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached’<sup>3</sup>. In this letter, the shared obligation of loving the neighbour is presented as a starting point in attempting to build meaningful dialogue between the two religions:

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<sup>2</sup> For the full text of the letter and responses to it, see <http://www.acommonword.com/>, accessed on 12.08.09

<sup>3</sup> The text of this lecture is on the Vatican website, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html), accessed on 21.08.09, however, the text of this document is amended from the version that the Pope originally delivered, in response to the outpouring of

Muslims and Christians together make up well over half the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world...

The basis for this peace and understanding already exists. It is part of the very foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God, and love of the neighbour. These principles are found over and over again in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity. The Unity of God, the necessity of love for Him, and the necessity of love of the neighbour is thus the common ground between Islam and Christianity. (Open letter sent on the occasion of the *Eid al-Fitr al-Mubarak* 1428 A. H from 138 Muslim leaders to His Holiness Pope Benedict and other Christian leaders, hereafter referred to as *A Common Word*)

*A Common Word* has been widely seen as representing a turning point in Christian-Muslim relations and opening new possibilities for interfaith dialogue. In a paper given at the Faith and Public Policy Forum at King's College, London, in April 2009, Tim Winter spoke of the unprecedented significance of the document

whose extraordinary trajectory is still unfolding, and which in many ways is calming tensions which the ongoing securitization of the world may only sharpen. Last July, the *Common Word* process reached Yale Divinity School, which had already coordinated a response by over three hundred evangelical thinkers. The final communiqué of the conference saw the evangelicals present endorsing language about a common 'Judeo-Christian-Islamic monotheistic heritage', rooted in the two commandments of love of God and love of neighbour. (Winter, 2009)

Winter also spoke of the possibilities within education for building a more meaningful peace between Christians and Muslims opened up by *A Common Word*.

Given the prominence of the figure of the neighbour in *A Common Word*, it seems appropriate to explore this question of dialogue through interrogating the relationship between this commandment, as one way of working towards peaceful relations, and Levinas's presentation of the idea of the neighbour, since Levinas's writing also offers a way of deepening our sense of obligation towards neighbours, inviting us to attend to a

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criticism following the original lecture, so that it is slightly clearer that the Pope distances himself from the comments of the emperor he cites.

responsibility towards the neighbour that is present in every address from one to another, that moves beyond the three Abrahamic faiths.

It is worth noting at the outset that many responses to the idea of obligation to the neighbour have been unwelcoming. In the introduction to Žižek, Santner and Reinhard's *The Neighbor*, Freud's rejection of the command to love from *Civilisation and Its Discontents* is noted. Freud questions, 'Why would we do it? What good will it do us?' and is even more dismissive when the neighbour is a stranger:

Not merely is the stranger in general unworthy of my love: I must honestly confess that he has more claim to my hostility and even my hatred. He seems not to have the least trace of love for me... If it will do him any good he has no hesitation in injuring me... Indeed, he need not even obtain an advantage; if he can satisfy any sort of desire by it, he thinks nothing of jeering at me, insulting me, slandering me and showing his superior power. (Freud cited in Žižek, Santner and Reinhard, 2005, p. 2)

For Freud, the relationship with the neighbour is characterised by mutual hostility and he rejects the ideal of love. But could we consider the obligation to our neighbours in a way that is unsentimentalised, acknowledging the fundamental risk of hostility in the relation, yet also holding open the possibility of peace?

In responding to *A Common Word*, the Archbishop of Canterbury emphasised the need for further reflection on what loving the neighbour means:

We support the clear affirmation in your letter, through texts from the Qur'an and the Bible, of the importance of love for the neighbour. Indeed, your letter can be considered an encouraging example of this love. We endorse the emphasis on generosity and self-sacrifice, and trust that these might be mutual marks of our continuing relationship with each other. The section in your letter on love for the neighbour is relatively brief, so we look forward to developing further the ways in which the theme is worked out within our traditions. We believe we have much to learn from each other in this matter, drawing on resources of wisdom, law, prophecy, poetry and narrative, both within and beyond our canonical scriptures to help each other come to a richer vision of being loving neighbours today.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Taken from <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1892>, accessed 12.08.09



In what follows I will explore how Levinas's presentation of the relation to the neighbour provides us with a way of moving towards this richer vision, but also responds to the challenge of Freud: this is not a sentimentalised vision, but recognises the possibility of war and hostility as constant risks. After exploring how Levinas addresses the idea of the neighbour, and some critiques that have been addressed to this, I will consider how this opens up debate about the nature of our relations with others and the possibility of dialogue within education, particularly between those of different and no religious traditions. But let us turn first to consider the ways in which our obligations to our neighbours have been seen within Christianity and Islam<sup>5</sup>.

### **Love of the Neighbour in Christianity and Islam**

Within the Abrahamic faiths, love of God and love of the neighbour are foundational principles. *A Common Word* drew attention to this and the responses to this letter further stressed this as a deep connection between these religions. A letter written in response from over three hundred Christian theologians exemplifies this:

We find deep affinities with our Christian faith when *A Common Word Between Us and You* insists that love is the pinnacle of our duties towards our neighbors. 'None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself,' the Prophet Muhammad said. In the New Testament we similarly read, 'Whoever does not love [the neighbor] does not know God' (1 John 4:8) and 'whoever does not love his brother who he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen' (1 John 4:20). God is love and our highest calling as human beings is to imitate the One whom we worship. ('A Christian Response to *A Common Word*', signed by over three hundred Christian theologians and leaders)<sup>6</sup>

There is not scope here to examine fully the commandment to love one's neighbour in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. I will therefore limit myself to a brief consideration of the command within Christianity and Islam in order to consider what is distinctive in how

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<sup>5</sup> With the intention that some of the more specifically Jewish features of this commandment might become apparent when examining Levinas's presentation of the relation with the neighbour, but it is, of course, significant that the letter 'A Common Word' was originally addressed to Christian leaders, and not to Christian and Jewish leaders.

<sup>6</sup> Published in *The New York Times*, 18<sup>th</sup> November 2007, and on the Common Word website, <http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/fullpageadbold18.pdf>, accessed 12.08.09



Levinas extends our understanding of this. In Islam, the importance of loving the neighbour is emphasised in the command to love for our neighbour what we ourselves cherish. This is the teaching of the Prophet Muhammad in the Hadith referred to by the Christian leaders above<sup>7</sup>. In the Qur'an, this ideal of self-sacrifice is also emphasised:

It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces to the East and the West; but righteous is he who believeth in God and the Last Day and the angels and the Scripture and the prophets; and giveth wealth, for love of Him, to kinsfolk and to orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to those who ask, and to set slaves free; and observeth proper worship and payeth the poor-due. And those who keep their treaty when they make one, and the patient in tribulation and adversity and time of stress. Such are they who are sincere. Such are the pious (*Al-Baqarah* 2:177).

And:

Ye will not attain unto righteousness until ye expend of that which ye love.  
(*Aal 'Imran* 3:92, both passages cited in *A Common Word*)

Loving the neighbour means serving those in need, specifically the vulnerable. In relation to political forms of Islam, it is worth highlighting that loving the neighbour means allowing their freedom of religion. It is stated in the Qur'an: 'Let there be no compulsion in religion...' (*Al-Baqarah*, 2:256). Difference between faiths is intended by God:

Had God willed He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He had given you (He hath made you as ye are). So vie one with another in good works. Unto God ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ. (*Al-Ma'idah*, 5:48)

Thus difference between self and neighbour is seen as good, not something to be overcome in totalising proselytism.

Within Christianity, the commandments to love God and the neighbour are the fulfilment of the Law (Matthew 22: 40). The verb used for love here is ἀγαπάω<sup>8</sup>, usually translated as charity, implying a commitment to help the other. The dualism that creeps

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<sup>7</sup> Sahih Al-Bukhari, Kitab al-Imam, Hadith no.13 and also Sahib Muslim, Kitab al-Imam, 67-7, Hadith no.45

<sup>8</sup> This verb is used by Paul in the famous passage on love in 1 Corinthians 13

into western strands of Christianity early within its history and is in evidence in much patristic theology complicates the ideal of love. Hannah Arendt highlights the complication within Augustine's view of the ideal, in *Love and Saint Augustine*. There are two notions of love operative in his writing: love for worldly things, termed *cupiditas*, which is a wrong love, compared with *caritas*, 'right love' which seeks 'eternity and the absolute future' (Arendt, 1996, p. 17). Love for the temporal order is seen as an obstacle and opposed to desire for an eternal God. As Arendt writes, 'an absolute futurity can be anticipated only through the annihilation of the mortal, temporal present, that is through hating the existing self' (p. 27). Thus we see the central contradiction emphasised by Arendt at the heart of Augustine's command to love one's neighbour:

The greatest difficulty this self-forgetfulness and complete denial of human existence raises for Augustine is that it makes the central Christian command to love one's neighbour as oneself well nigh impossible. The difficulty arises from the definition of love as desire and from the definition of man as one who remains always wanting and forever isolated from what gives him happiness, that is, his proper being. Even *caritas*... is no manifestation of an original inter-connectedness of either man and God or man and the world. (Arendt, 1996, p. 30)

Arendt goes on to examine Augustine's 'order of love' outlined in *City of God*. Here we see that a 'man's proper attitude to the world is not "enjoyment" (*frui*) but "use" (*uti*)' (p. 37). According to Augustine's conceptual framework, there can be no reason to love the neighbour, as belonging to the world, other than the divine command: 'The love of my neighbour is at best a secondary consideration for a desire whose aim transcends mankind and the world' (p. 41).

This dualism has tended to dominate Christian interpretations of neighbourly love and can be seen in a recent papal encyclical:

Love of the neighbour is ... shown to be possible in the way proclaimed by the Bible, by Jesus. It consists in the very fact that, in God and with God, I love even the person I do not like or even know. This can only take place on the basis of an intimate encounter with God, an encounter which has become a communion of will, even affecting my feelings. Then I learn to look on the other person not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the

perspective of Jesus Christ. His friend is my friend... (*Papal Encyclical Letter, 'Deus Caritas Est'*)<sup>9</sup>

There are many theories of Christian love that have attempted to redress this dualistic emphasis.<sup>10</sup> Don Cupitt, for example, has argued that to say that God is love is to say nothing more than love is God, suggesting that loving the neighbour *is* loving God, nothing more, nothing less. For Cupitt, loving the neighbour *is* the manifestation of the divine: God is nothing more than the transcendence and grace of this love (Cupitt, 2003).

In *A Common Word*, this shared ideal of loving the neighbour is seen as a starting point for dialogue and it has clearly had significant impact.<sup>11</sup> But given that a barrier to dialogue is the suspicion with which religious sensibilities are regarded by those *outside* religious traditions, if we are to consider the possibility of interreligious dialogue within education, we must consider how this idea of an obligation towards our neighbour might have broader resonance *beyond* the Abrahamic faiths. It is here that Levinas enables us to think of how the possibilities for interfaith dialogue and community in religion extend beyond religious boundaries, in a way that troubles how community itself tends to be theorised in education as a space of commonality, or the site of production of (individuals within) a rational community. Let us turn now to examine how Levinas considers the idea of the neighbour.

## The Neighbour

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas explores the idea of the neighbour through the language of proximity. This concept of proximity is used by Levinas for what is between self and neighbour, not denoting a 'space' or state of relation between self and neighbour, but rather the movement of self towards the neighbour outside of the objective character of relations:

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<sup>9</sup> From [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html), accessed 28.08.09

<sup>10</sup> And it should also be noted that this dualism is not equally present in all forms of Christianity, for example eastern Orthodox Christianity tends to place less emphasis on dualistic oppositions.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, a list of initiatives that have followed at <http://www.acommonword.com/en/a-common-word/2-general/161-qa-common-wordq-accomplishments-2007-2008.html>, accessed 12.08.09

Proximity is not a state, a repose, but, a restlessness, null site, outside of the place of rest. It overwhelms the calm of the non-ubiquity of a being which becomes a rest in a site. No site then, is ever sufficiently a proximity, like an embrace. Never close enough, proximity does not congeal into a structure... Proximity, as the 'closer and closer,' becomes the subject. (*OB*, p. 82)

As a subject, I am constituted by this 'null site' of proximity, yet this is prior to identity, so that 'one can no longer say what the ego or I is' (*ibid*). Proximity exceeds the order of the rational, in a non-reciprocal obsession by the neighbour. Because it is never close enough, I am always moving towards the neighbour, extending as a subject:

Proximity is to be described as extending the subject in its very subjectivity, which is both a relationship and a term of this relationship... As signification, the-one-for-the-other, proximity is not a configuration produced in the soul. It is an immediacy older than the abstractness of nature. Nor is it fusion; it is contact with the other... In contact itself the touching and the touched separate, as though the touched moved off, was always already other, did not have anything in common with me. (p. 86)

Robert Gibbs examines the themes of height and nearness, conceived in terms of transcendence, in relation to proximity. I never reach the place of my neighbour, even if I substitute myself for him, and this perpetual motion towards him denotes the infinite responsibility received in passivity:

Ethics notes that the more I draw near the further away I am. The more I see the other as the one for whom I must answer, the greater my responsibility will become. As I step closer, my obligations grow, the task of approaching becomes more arduous, and responsibility increases... This infinity of responsibility occurs in nearness to the other. (Gibbs, 1995, p. 17)

The neighbour to whom I am responsible is my brother, to whom I exist in a relation of fraternity without reciprocity (*OB*, p. 87). All fraternity and community start from *my* debt of obligation, assigned to me in passivity: 'The neighbor assigns me before I designate him. This is a modality not of a knowing, but of an obsession, a shuddering of the human quite different from cognition' (*ibid*).

Some have criticised this notion of infinite obligation as groundless, just as Freud questions the Judaeo-Christian commandment of 'loving the neighbour': *why* should I

have this onerous responsibility? Levinas suggests, as we have explored in relation to *Totality and Infinity*, that the source of this asymmetrical responsibility cannot be consciously known or understood: we could not represent the authority of this command to ourselves, it is found prior to experience or knowledge:

In an approach I am first a servant of a neighbor, already late and guilty for being late. I am as it were ordered from the outside, traumatically commanded, without interiorizing by representation and concepts the authority that commands me. Without asking myself: What then is it to me? Where does he get his right to command? (ibid)

To ask the question, ‘Why am I my brother’s keeper?’ is to misunderstand the nature of the obligation, seeking an origin and justification for what accuses me *prior* to consciousness, lying beyond thematisation and conceptualisation. Morgan provides a helpful explanation of how that infinite obligation to my neighbour is always inescapably there:

whenever I am engaged with another person or persons, whatever I am doing, my relationships and my actions are ultimately of significance, in a sense before I am and before my capacity to think or act, precisely because of the capacity I have and the necessity that falls on me to respond to that other person’s needs and very existence. I may be blind to this capacity and necessity to respond – my responsibility as responsiveness – but it is always there, an aspect of me and my relationship with each and every other person, whether I realize it or not. Hence, in a sense, I am always, in whatever I do, satisfying its directions or failing to do so, unavoidably. I am responsible for and to the other person ‘before’ I am a person... [This] is Levinas’s attempt to unsettle us into seeing our ordinary, everyday life in a different way. (Morgan, 2007, p. 160)

This obligation to my neighbour from which I cannot escape, although I am frequently blind to it, is uncomfortable, even if it brings the possibility of peace.

We have already explored some of the differences in vocabulary between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. It is worth noting that, as Bernasconi points out, between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, the language shifts significantly towards the language of contestation:

Whereas according to the earlier analysis I found myself put in question in the face of the stranger, in the later analysis I am 'like a stranger'. My home is no longer the site of inwardness and hospitality; it has become the site of contestation. Furthermore, the introduction of persecution alters the status accorded to apology. (Bernasconi, 1995, p. 79)

Bernasconi links this language of persecution to the dedication of *Otherwise than Being* to 'those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the national Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-Semitism.' Elisabeth Weber suggests that the resounding of concepts like 'trauma' and 'psychosis' to evoke the persecution by the neighbour may refer to the real 'psychosis' and 'trauma' suffered by survivors of the Shoah in the 'anamnesis' of the other's death, the impossibility of forgetting the other's impossible death (Weber 1995). But the language of persecution to describe the responsibility for the neighbour is neither solely rooted in the 'guilt' of the survivor, nor used as some formal structure, but evokes the trauma of real persecution: the 'fate suffered by the persecuted – the Jewish people and all those who are victims of the same anti-Semitism – underwrites Levinas's philosophy in a rigorous sense ... It is more even than an ontic fundament.' (Bernasconi, 1995, p. 83) To see the notion of persecution as linked to the Shoah does not limit this conceptualisation of responsibility. While opening up some of the political implications of proximity between self and neighbour, it also serves to remind me of *my* obligation to 'the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man', to all who persecute me with the knowledge that I am always more responsible and can never absolve myself of this bond of ever-deepening responsibility.

The neighbour cannot be defined, as to do so would be to bring them within my understanding: their proximity is prior to identity. Michael Smith draws attention to linguistic features of Levinas's use of the term 'neighbour':

There is a link between Levinas's decision to use the word neighbor (*prochain*) alongside the earlier word Stranger (*Étranger*) and the ascendancy of the notion of proximity (*proximité*)... French has two words that correspond to the English word neighbor. Levinas is not discussing the term

*voisin*, which is the normal term for the person who lives close by, but the term *prochain*, which is used in the Bible to indicate one's neighbor in the sense of one's fellow man (or woman). (Smith, 2005, pp. 91-2)

Levinas's use of the term *prochain* suggests the intention to evoke the term's biblical resonances,<sup>12</sup> recalling the commandment to love one's neighbour. Here the command is not to love them 'as myself', as this would bring them into my domain, with love conditional on a prior sense of self: I am bound as responsible *before* I love myself. This is not to say that Levinas would necessarily reject the idea of reciprocal responsibilities; his point is rather that any reciprocity stems from a prior asymmetric responsibility for my neighbour.

The neighbour approaches and summons me to responsibility. I am thus myself a singular subject in my unique responsibility. But the approach of the third party, disrupting the asymmetry of obligation to my neighbour, is also present in the proximity of my neighbour, and it is with this that society begins.

### **Justice, Society, the Third and Fraternity**

I have mentioned the idea of the third party in earlier chapters. In *Totality and Infinity*, we have seen how the third party is already present in the approach of the Other, but this is a theme that is significantly more developed in *Otherwise than Being* in relation to the idea of the neighbour. It is with this idea that Levinas explains the concepts of justice, society and philosophy: 'The fact that the other, my neighbor, is also a third party with respect to another, who is also a neighbor, is the birth of thought, consciousness, justice and philosophy' (*OB*, p. 128). The third party is neither an empirical fact nor a specific other: 'In the proximity of the other, all the others than the other obsess me, and already

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<sup>12</sup> *Prochain* is the term used for 'the neighbour' most commonly in French translations of the biblical Greek term πλησιος (of which term the closest English translation would be near / hard by / close to). Regarding the Hebrew term which 'neighbour' translates in Leviticus and Deuteronomy (and which πλησιος translates in the Septuagint), there is some disagreement amongst scholars as to whether the term was used to refer more to 'fellow Israelite' or 'alien' living nearby (see, for example, the discussion between Morton Smith and J. M. Cameron in 'Love Which Neighbor?' in the New York Review of Books, Volume 27, Number 12, July 1980), but Levinas's emphasis on alterity and use of the term 'stranger' would suggest that the resonances of the translation 'fellow Israelite' are not quite fitting.

this obsession cries out for justice' (p. 158). Thus it is the approach of the third party that in *Otherwise than Being* brings about justice, since justice appears with the coexistence that comes in the approach of the others through proximity to the neighbour:

The third party is other than the neighbor, but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply his fellow... The third party introduces a contradiction in the saying whose signification before the other until then went in one direction. It is ... the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice? A question of consciousness. Justice is necessary, that is, comparison, coexistence, contemporaneity, assembling, order, thematization, the visibility of faces, and thus intentionality and the intellect, and in intentionality and the intellect, the intelligibility of a system, and thence also a copresence on an equal footing as before a court of justice. (p. 157)

Levinas describes the relationship with the third as 'an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is looked at' (p. 158). The third party interrupts the asymmetry of responsibility between self and neighbour by revealing the existence of other subjects who are neighbours to my neighbour. Through the third's approach, I question my place in these relations of responsibility, my 'own place in the sun', and with this consciousness begins. The third demands justice, justification and ultimately weighing up, calculating, judgement about how I take up the responsibilities I have for all the others. Thus, society is not founded on equality or commonality, but on a community of others, as Davis writes: 'a multiplicity of others, in which each subject is unique, recalcitrant to classification' (Davis, 1996, p. 83). Levinas emphasises that justice is not meant here as juridical, but arises only out of proximity:

justice is not a legality regulating human masses, from which a technique of social equilibrium is drawn, harmonizing antagonistic forces.... Justice is impossible without the one that renders it finding himself in proximity. His function is not limited to the 'function of judgment,' the subsuming of particular cases under a general rule. The judge is not outside the conflict, but the law is in the midst of proximity. Justice, society, the State and its institutions, exchanges and work are comprehensible out of proximity. This means that nothing is outside of the control of the responsibility of the one for the other. (*OB*, p. 159)

For Levinas, justice entails consciousness and thematisation, but these are not possible without proximity. Proximity here is seen as a control on the implicit violence that must



take place within the work and mechanisms of the state, which must necessarily involve equality and thematisation. This notion of justice associated with the approach of the third is seen by Levinas as maintaining infinite responsibility, balanced against, or in tension with, working out what justice for all the others means in the web of relations in which I find myself. But does this idea of the third successfully maintain this tension of holding together infinite obligation to my neighbour and the equalising operations of the State within this notion of justice, or does it actually strain the tension to breaking point? Let us consider some objections that have been posed to these ideas of the neighbour and the third party.

One of the most prominent recent critics of Levinas's idea of the neighbour has been Žižek who, in 'Neighbours and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence', questions Levinas's presentation of the relation to the neighbour. He suggests that love, in Levinas's account, privileges the neighbour over the 'faceless' third and instead calls for a justice that acts in favour of the 'inhuman' third:

We should therefore assume the risk of countering Levinas's position with a more radical one: others are primordially an (ethically) indifferent multitude, and love is a violent gesture of cutting into this multitude and privileging a One as the neighbor, thus introducing a radical imbalance into the whole. In contrast to love, justice begins when I remember the faceless many left in the shadow in this privileging of the One. Justice and love are thus structurally incompatible: justice, not love, has to be blind; it must disregard the privileged One whom I 'really understand.' What this means is that the Third is not secondary: it is always-already here, and the primordial ethical obligation is toward this Third who is *not* here in the face-to-face relationship, the one in the shadow, like the absent child of a love-couple. (Žižek, 2005, p. 182)

Žižek goes on to argue that this leads to 'the radical anti-Levinasian conclusion: the true ethical step is... the one of choosing *against* the face, for the *third*.' (p. 183).

How fair is this charge against Levinas, of unjustly privileging the neighbour over the third? Žižek describes the 'inhuman' third as 'inhuman Otherness itself: the Otherness of a human being reduced to inhumanity, the Otherness exemplified by the terrifying figure of the *Muselmann*, the "living dead" in the concentration camps' (p. 160), a term he has

borrowed from Primo Levi, via Agamben's provocative discussion of Levi in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999). He suggests that Levinas's notion of the face and the neighbour gentrify and domesticate 'inhuman' faces, concealing their monstrosity. But surely Levinas, in articulating the approach of the third, also argues for a justice that balances my responsibility to my neighbour with responsibility to all the others, as all the others are already present in the proximity of the neighbour, and the Otherness of both the neighbour and all the others is maintained through the idea of illeity.

Žižek's pays little attention in 'Neighbors and Other Monsters' to the way in which the introduction of the third party in *Totality and Infinity* already preempts his criticism, or to the language of traumatic responsibility in *Otherwise than Being*, which implies inescapable responsibility not just for my neighbour, but for all the others who demand justice. We see this idea of the extent of my responsibility to *all* the others, those whose 'faces' are not present to me in my interactions with my neighbours, in an interview with Levinas in which he expands on the biblical roots of the idea of the face and the commandment it issues to me not to kill:

In the Old Testament there is the sixth commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill'. This does not mean simply that you are not to go around firing a gun all the time. It refers, rather, to the fact that, in the course of your life, in different ways, you kill someone. For example, when we sit down at the table in the morning and drink coffee, we kill an Ethiopian who doesn't have any coffee. It is in this sense that the commandment must be understood. There is also the phrase 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour'. It is expressed in several ways. There is also 'Thou shalt love the stranger.' (Levinas, 1988, p. 173)

Here the relation to the neighbour includes the obligation towards the stranger we have never met, and this is linked to the question of justice: what I have, my place in the sun, is put into question by the needs of others whom I have never met who also demand justice. Žižek argues that it is not so much the socio-political consequences of Levinas's position that he finds problematic, but rather his account of the Other's face: 'This rendering is wrong in its own terms, as a phenomenological description, since it misses the way the Third is always-already here' (Žižek, 2005, p. 184). But this is what Levinas emphasises

too: I cannot be in a relation with my neighbour without the advent of all the others: 'The other is from the first the brother of all the other men' (*OB*, p. 158).

Hand suggests that 'Neighbours and Other Monsters' is based more on a disagreement with Butler than Levinas – 'Butler somehow morphs into a German-language, anti-Nietzschean, conservative Hegelian, Adorno stand-in' (Hand, 2009, p. 119) – and as a result, Levinas's account emerges stronger than Žižek's. Hand sums up the way in which Žižek's own conclusions seem remarkably similar to, if less forcefully articulated than, Levinas's own conceptualisation of justice via the neighbour and the third:

Given Levinas's actual presentation, then, of the face's 'non-phenomenality', it is Žižek's figures which emerge as limited, local and merely political, while his supposedly anti-Levinasian conclusion, in which the third party's presence suspends the hold of the face, resembles a timid version of Levinas's developed description of the introduction of justice, where '[t]he relationship with the third party is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is looked at' (*OB*, p. 158). (Hand, 2009, p. 121)

Thus while Žižek does perhaps draw our attention to the ways in which excessive philosophical transcendentalism can lead us to neglect concrete demands for justice, it is actually his own language of facelessness, more than Levinas's, that makes the 'unlovely' an abstraction and fails to draw attention to the neighbour's vulnerability and need of my response.

In his more recent *Violence* (2009), Žižek appears to contradict the earlier charge against Levinas that the neighbour is known and unjustly privileged, with the new charge that the unknowability of the neighbour could lead to violence:

There is ... another obverse and much more unsettling dimension to the Levinasian figure of the Neighbour as the imponderable Other who deserves our unconditional respect. That is, the imponderable Other as enemy, the enemy who is the absolute Other... whose very reasoning is foreign to us, so that no authentic encounter with him in battle is possible. Although Levinas did not have this dimension in mind, the radical ambiguity, the traumatic character of the Neighbour makes it easy to understand how Levinas's notion of the Other prepared the ground (opened up the space) for it in a way strictly

homologous to the way that Kantian ethics prepared the ground for the notion of diabolical evil. Horrible as it may sound, the Levinasian Other as the abyss of otherness from which the ethical injunction emanates and the Nazi figure of the Jew as the less-than-human Other-enemy originate from the same source. (Žižek, 2009, p. 47)<sup>13</sup>

We have already discussed in Chapter 3 how for Levinas, the possibility of peaceful relations with the neighbour must reject any assumptions of sameness. Ethics must be rooted in alterity, the radical otherness of my neighbour, since if ethics is grounded on sameness a door is opened for violence towards those who are not seen as ‘really’ the same. An example used by Žižek, in the same book, serves to highlight precisely this point. If ethics is grounded on any idea of shared brotherhood or shared humanity, this can lead violence against those who reject that brotherhood:

The Christian motto ‘All men are brothers’... also means that those who do not accept brotherhood *are not men*. In the early years of the Iranian revolution, Khomeini played on the same paradox when he claimed, in an interview for the Western press, that the Iranian revolution was the most humane in all of history: not a singled person was killed by the revolutionaries. When the surprised journalist asked about the death penalties publicised in the media, Khomeini calmly replied: ‘Those that we killed were not men, but criminal dogs!’ (Žižek, 2009, 47)

It seems that Levinas is right to see the otherness of the neighbour as fundamental to the ethical relation. The question is, however, whether his conception of the relation between the neighbour and the third party ends up conceding too much to ontology, such that the sense of the alterity of my neighbour and the infinitude of my obligation to him are diminished through their being relegated to an other-worldly order of justice. This is a problem that Caygill articulates provocatively.

In his analysis of the final chapters of *Otherwise than Being*, Caygill examines how Levinas attempts to link proximity, substitution and responsibility with the order of

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<sup>13</sup> Žižek’s disdain for what some interpretations of Levinas have become is also clear in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, in which he argues that the subversive kernel of both Christianity and Judaism is dialectical materialism: ‘I do not think that the present vague spiritualism, the focus on the openness to Otherness and its unconditional Call, this mode in which Judaism has become almost the hegemonic ethico-spiritual attitude of today’s intellectuals, is in itself the “natural” form of what one can designate, in traditional terms, as Jewish spirituality.’ (Žižek, 2003, p. 8)

ontology. He describes how for Levinas, as we have seen above, proximity 'acts as a control on the exercise of power or the application of judgement ... Proximity is called to serve as a control on the equalising operations of the state and its institutions and upon the realm of work and commerce' (Caygill, 2002, p. 142). The problem that Caygill draws attention to arises when Levinas attempts to describe how it is that proximity might control and correct the operations of the state, leading 'to an unexpected insistence on the priority of the relation to the other over the third' (ibid.). We can see this, for example, in the following passage:

In no way is justice a degradation of obsession, a degeneration of the for-the-other..., *a degeneration that would be produced in the measure that for empirical reasons the initial duo would become a trio*. But the contemporaneousness of the multiple is tied about the diachrony of two: justice remains justice only, in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest. (*OB*, p. 159, emphasis mine)

Caygill points out that this seeming privileging of the other over the third, in an attempt to preserve the alterity of the other, leaves open the possibility of violence and war against the third in the name of the other, in a manner similar to Žižek's original charge: 'If the responsibility for all is channelled through the other, then the potential of a war against all *except* one's other remains a possibility' (Caygill, 2002, p. 143). The reason that Levinas resorts in this passage to privileging the other and maintaining the distinction between the other and the third is, as Caygill points out, to prevent the other being absorbed by the totality. He cites the danger Levinas alludes to that 'the State issued from the proximity of the neighbour is always on the verge of integrating him into a we, which congeals both me and my neighbour' (*OB*, p. 161) and notes that this makes an assumption of the fragility of proximity, and the superior power of the state. Caygill is critical of this move, and considers the possibility of its reverse:

The contrary position in which all thirds become others is relegated to an 'angelic order of justice' and not considered to be an option for this world. With this move Levinas makes himself vulnerable to the same criticism that he himself made on a number of occasions of the corruption that can ensue from the other-worldly orientation of the Christian political theology, namely the displacement of the 'angelic order of justice' to the city of God is

effectively to surrender the possibility of justice in the human city. (Caygill, 2002, p. 143)

This might lead, as Caygill suggests, to a diminishing of the force of the ethical and political challenge of *Otherwise than Being*, with Levinas having to ‘concede too much to ontology and [leaving] its structures intact, while opening up just enough space to permit an ethical role for philosophy as the questioning of the state’ (ibid.). However, as Caygill argues, this is not the only conclusion that can be reached: a more compelling vision for how the idea of the neighbour leads to the possibilities of peace, community and justice is provided through the interwoven themes of fraternity and illeity.

We have already considered, in the previous chapter, something of the significance of Levinas’s concept of *illeity* for understanding what it is to be religious and how this will affect our understanding of religious education. There we explored how Levinas uses this concept to signify what is near at hand, yet always at a distance, overflowing cognition. Caygill argues that illeity is central to Levinas’s prophetic politics if we are to avoid the disappointing conclusion that the otherwise than being can lead us back to war. He describes the importance of illeity as follows:

The extremely concentrated concept of illeity is central to Levinas’s notion of prophetic witness both beyond and within philosophy. It is called at once to name the third mode of thought between philosophy and religion, to epitomise Levinas’s critique of phenomenology, and to provoke the most unrestrained version of his ethics, and in extremity even to serve as one of the names of God. (Caygill, 2002, p. 145)

We saw in the previous chapter how illeity can serve as one of the names of God. In the relation of proximity, Levinas describes illeity as ‘the Infinite that escapes the objectification of thematisation and of dialogue ... in the third person.’ (*OB*, p. 150) Yet this “thirdness” is different from that of the third man’ (ibid.); it is not the third party who interrupts proximity and demands justice. While illeity resists thematisation, it is neither self nor the neighbour, but the way in which my responsibility arrives, anarchically, without origin or principle. In this sense, as Caygill suggests, it is not only a third between the self and the neighbour, but a third between immanence and transcendence, and thus not the space of the Hegelian mediation between self and other,

but rather the hollowing out of a distance which yet 'open[s] the relation of self and other, but always exceeding the terms of any relation' (Caygill, 2002, p. 147).

As already outlined, illeity is used by Levinas in contrast with the notion of reciprocity and means that slipping into a relation of equality is impossible, so that neither I, nor the third, nor my neighbour, can be reduced to essence or identity. With illeity, the emphasis is placed by Levinas on the impossibility of fusion, on the space of separation between the I and the Other and, as this space, we see the 'thirdness' of illeity. As Llewelyn explains:

Levinas underlines the importance of retaining a different third-personal pronominality in the primary intrigue. In the space marked by the hyphen between the I and the Thou intrudes not It, but He. In the trace of the never having been here – the never Daseinly *Da* – of illeity stands the Thou whom I approach, lest even the asymmetrical proximity of response that conditions responsibility fuse into being-with. (Llewelyn, 1995, p. 188)

Thus, the trace of the transcendent, never brought to presence, is always in the approach of my neighbour and the introduction of all the others, as illeity, and this prevents the asymmetrical relation of responsibility from becoming the pure mutuality of Buber's *I-Thou*.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Levinas describes illeity as the trace of the divine, the Infinite by which the subject is inspired, and its glory is the saying, 'that is, a sign given to the other, peace announced to the other, responsibility for the other, to the extent of substitution' (*OB*, p. 148). This breaks up the Kantian unity of transcendental apperception, and can only be witnessed, not thematised, signifying out of responsibility. As passive, receiving this inspiration, there is also a sense in which I find the order in obedience within my own consciousness, already there, and this finding, 'in a remarkable way, reconcil[es] autonomy and heteronomy' (*ibid.*). This hearing of the command through illeity is traumatic and I cannot know its origin, but it is through this ambiguous hearing of the command, of which I am also the author and as a result of this I perceive the other *in* the same, that ethics is possible. The difficulty of Levinas's prose, in trying to bear witness to this idea of finding the order within myself, itself testifies to the

impossibility of describing or thematising this idea of the ambivalence of this trauma - finding the infinite demand that the neighbour addresses to me that comes to me from the thirdness of illeity, but finding it in myself, *already* having been obedient to the demand of my neighbour, as we see in the following passage:

The inscription of the order in the for-the-other of obedience is an anarchic being affected, which slips into me 'like a thief' through the outstretched nets of consciousness. This trauma has surprised me completely; the order has never been represented, for it has never been presented... to the point that it is I that only says, and after the event, this unheard-of obligation. This ambivalence is the exception and subjectivity of the subject, its very psyche, a possibility of inspiration. It is the possibility of being the author of what had been breathed in unbeknownst to me, of having received, one knows not from where, that of which I am author. In the responsibility for the other we are at the heart of the ambiguity of inspiration. The unheard-of saying is enigmatically in the anarchic response, in my responsibility for the other. The trace of infinity is this ambiguity in the subject, in turns beginning and makeshift, a diachronic ambivalence which ethics makes possible. (*OB*, pp. 148-49)

We have already considered an earlier version of these ideas, from 'Truth of Disclosure and Truth of Testimony' in relation to the idea of autonomy in Chapter 3. Here, in the development of these ideas, we see that it is finding this order within the self that interrupts the unity of transcendental apperception, consciousness, and leads to the possibility of justice, inspiration and prophecy – 'this responsibility prior to commitment, is precisely the other in the same, inspiration and prophecy, the *passing itself* of the Infinite' (p. 150).

Caygill suggests that this might lead us to a more compelling vision of justice than the view outlined earlier, which can ultimately lead back to war. He describes how this voice heard in the command may also be the voice of the third or illeity, and this *might* interrupt the demand that the neighbour makes on me in the name of justice, thus overturning the priority of the neighbour that Levinas seems to suggest in some of the passages we considered earlier. This idea of prophecy might then lead to a prophetic politics:



Prophetic politics opens the possibility for a notion of justice as perpetual interruption, of the self by the other and of the other by the third. The third in question here, and the justice to which it gives rise, is not the third of the state and its justice thought of in terms of equivalence and measure, but the third thought of in terms of divinity and in the divine approbation of human fraternity. It is with fraternity that the section 'Witness and Prophecy' [in *Otherwise than Being*] ends, namely, with the impossibility of denying fraternity, of prophetically interrupting every fixing of fraternity between self and other in the name of the third. (Caygill 2002, p. 150)

This idea of fraternity, which prophecy or a prophetic politics is 'incapable of denying' (*OB*, p. 150), is, as we have seen, also bound up with the idea of the neighbour, who is also my brother. This leads to a prophetic understanding of the possibility of community arising from responsibility rather than any notion of commonality. Levinas emphasises this understanding of fraternity predicated in the separation of illeity:

It is not because the neighbor would be recognized as belonging to the same genus as me that he concerns me. He is precisely *other*. The community with him begins in my obligation to him. The neighbor is a brother. A fraternity that cannot be abrogated, an unimpeachable assignation (*OB*, p. 87).

Caygill draws attention to Levinas's exploration of this relation between illeity as thirdness, fraternity, responsibility and proximity in the 1969 essay 'The Name of God According to a Few Talmudic Texts'. Here Levinas describes fraternity as providing a concrete example of what might seem an abstract idea of anarchic responsibility, or here 'the Absolute':

This abstract idea of something that precedes the originary which we seem to be constructing is provided for us in a concrete way by the responsibility prior to commitment, by the responsibility that obligates us to others and not to myself. Or, more simply, by human fraternity. A configuration of purely ontological notions turns here into ethical relations. As in the Talmud: the absolution of the Ab-solute, the effacement of God, is positively the obligation to make peace in the world. (*BV*, p. 125)

Here Levinas suggests that the Transcendent, the obligation, that is in me, preceding any origin, is also found in fraternity and 'the obligation to make peace in the world'. He goes on to again describe this idea of a prior responsibility, which finds a concrete expression in fraternity, as illeity:

This anteriority of responsibility must be understood in relation to freedom as the very authority of the Absolute which is 'too great' for the measure or finitude of presence, revelation, order and being, and which consequently, as neither being nor non-being, is the 'excluded third party' of the beyond of being and non-being, a third person that we have called 'illeity' and that is perhaps also expressed by the word God. A beyond being, resistant to thematization and origin ... an authority that orders my neighbour for me as a face. (p. 126)

This anterior responsibility, arising in my responsivity to the neighbour and making fraternity possible, is, as we have explored in the preceding chapters, 'the essence of language' (ibid.), and thus already implied in the condition of being taught by the neighbour, receiving language, meaning and the uniqueness of my subjectivity as a gift. Illeity then, as a thirdness, a space, between me and my neighbour who is my brother, and between him and all the brothers, can be described as a surplus of responsibility that is always there, and Levinas as witnessing to it prophetically, inviting his hearer to attend to it to bring about the conditions of a more just community.

Illeity, this quality of thirdness, roots responsibility in me, but it is a responsibility for *all* the others, which deepens the more I take it up and means that it is impossible to separate my responsibility for my neighbour from my responsibility for all. One way of thinking about this is illustrated by Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*. This play is set in affluent America, in the years after the war, and Joe Keller's story is apparently one of success and devotion to his family. Yet during the play, we learn that Keller, has sold cracked cylinder heads to the US Army Air Force, which led twenty one planes to crash, a responsibility he only gradually owns up to at the end of the play when he realises that his son, Larry, has killed himself on learning of his father's part in those crashes. The theme of this play is the conflict of responsibilities Keller experiences: his responsibility to his family - Keller paints his refusal to own up to his guilt in the pilots' deaths as motivated by his desire to support his family by allowing his factory to continue to operate, so that his other son, Chris, can eventually take over the family business - balanced with his responsibility to others in society. Ultimately, Miller aims to show, through the death of Larry, how these responsibilities are bound together: we cannot

separate our responsibilities to our family from our responsibilities to others in society. In gradually accepting his own part in the deaths of the pilots, Keller comes to recognise that his responsibility was not just to his son or to his family, but to all those his actions affected: 'Sure, he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were' (Miller, 1947, p. 68). His wife responds to this with a refusal to accept this unboundedness of responsibility for all the others, but her son Chris tells her that more than this is necessary - responsibility in this sense cannot be limited: 'You can be better! Once and for all you can know that there's a universe of people outside and you're responsible to it' (p. 69). Thus the lesson of *All My Sons* has to do with the relation to the neighbour and the relation to all the others: Keller answers to the demands of the relation to his family, but is blind to the demands of those others beyond that. The tragedy is played out through his failure to see that his relation to his sons is already structured by his relation to all the others.

Illeity likewise means that justice and peace begin with accepting *my* responsibility to all the others: my responsibility for those close by cannot be marked off from my responsibility for all the others. In this sense, illeity radically differentiates Levinas's theory of society from other political and philosophical theories. There is in this fraternal society founded on a prior asymmetry of responsibility, a surplus that cannot be represented, yet which is the possibility of society and of justice within society. As Theodore de Boer suggests, 'It is sometimes called a 'surplus'; yet, far from being superfluous, it is a condition of possibility ... It is true that charity without social justice is void, but social justice without this dimension of goodness and hospitality may be blind' (De Boer, 1986, p. 103). And so the surplus in the trace of illeity allows my neighbour and all the others to remain beyond my comprehension and the self-absorbed affection, of which Žižek accuses Levinas's theory, yet at the same time allows a way of understanding society as predicated on the possibility of peaceful relation between self and neighbour.

The idea of community that this understanding of the neighbour leads to can be compared with the way in which Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons outline an understanding of

community in education, drawing on the work of Roberto Esposito. Although we often think of community as relating to what individuals share in common, they emphasise another way of thinking:

The original meaning of *munus* (void, debt, gift) in *communus* is exactly the opposite of this conception [of commonality]. According to [Esposito], community is not a matter of 'having' something in 'common', something that we share with others, but of the opposite: it is not a matter of 'having' but of 'lacking'; not about 'something' but about 'nothing'. This void or lack refers to what we owe to others; it means that we have obligations towards others, despite our not being able to define precisely what these obligations are. The 'I' or the 'you' is caught up in a network of obligations that it cannot answer. The subjects of a community are united by a common obligation in the sense of 'I owe you something' (not 'you owe me something'). (Masschelein and Simons, 2002, pp. 601-2)

Levinas might warn us against the idea of 'common obligation' as it seems to lead away from the idea of asymmetry of responsibility, that my obligation is mine and mine alone. Yet there are resonances here with this idea of community beginning in obligation, in responsibility for another. Masschelein and Simons describe how in this notion of community, as in Levinas's, the subject is always infringed by others, with an otherness within the self in the obligation that is found in the self. They suggest that against this notion of community, there is a tendency within social relations to immunise against this demanding obligation that impinges upon me, attempting to define what we have in common, to legislate our responsibilities, 'transforming every social relation into a transparent rule, norm, contract or agreement, and seeing every task we undertake within an economy of calculable exchange' (p. 602).

This tendency can be related to the economy of exchange we explored in Chapter 4, but it is worth restating the point: education and the responsibility of subjectivity, whatever one's role within the educative relation, can never be entirely bound by regulated structures, whether in terms of regulating relationships, or the clear setting of aims and objectives for what is taught. As a teacher, my responsibilities to all within the academic community within which I am situated - my students, colleagues, subject discipline - are boundless and often aporetic. I am addressed from the outside by all of these, and

Masschelein and Simons suggest that this implies the importance of listening in the educative relation:

Being a listener involves precisely one's being addressed: one owes an answer; one is positioned in a network of obligations (towards the other person, the language, and so on), a network that one is not able to master. And this means that I will not be able completely to pay my debts. Even the supposition that I might be able to do so, that it would be possible to calculate exactly what I owe to the other (for example, to my father, or to my son or my teachers or students), would itself be unethical. It would mean that in principle I might be able to absolve myself of these relations, to get rid of them, to pay my debts. (p. 603)

This then is the idea of community that Levinas might be seen as inviting us to attend to within education, at odds with the current tendencies in educational discourses and practices that we have considered in the preceding chapters. As a teacher, my subjectivity emerges in response to the multiple, incalculable demands that I am always in the process of answering, and never could answer fully. As one who is also being taught, my responsibility to the texts that I read, that I can never fully master, my responsibility to my teachers, to my peers, to listen and attend to all of these, is also unlimited. The judgements I make in discharging these responsibilities must inevitably involve comparison, rationality and thus the ontological is brought into this process of responding ethically, yet the ethical demand is always there, for each subject within an educational community.

What then does this idea of community, beginning with my obligation to my neighbour, mean for how we might understand the practice of dialogue within education? In order to consider this, let us return to the question of loving the neighbour, which was seen as the starting point for interfaith dialogue in *A Common Word*.

### **Dialogue Between Neighbours and Strangers**

In an essay on Rosenzweig, 'Between Two Worlds', Levinas considers the idea of loving the neighbour in a way that we have not seen in either *Totality and Infinity* or *Otherwise*

*than Being*.<sup>14</sup> In addressing the question of what the commandment to love means within Judaism, Levinas emphasises that this obligation is commanded within both Christianity and Judaism:

Two typically Jewish elements have appeared: the idea of the commandment, as something essential to the love-relation; love is manifested in the commandment, it is alone in being able to command love; the idea of Man the redeemer and not of God the Redeemer...

In order for love to be able to penetrate the Word, which is Redemption, in order for Time to move to Eternity, Love must not remain at the state of individual enterprise, it must become the work of community, the time of a community. (DF, p. 193)

The obligation to love, he suggests, does not remain my obligation, but becomes 'the work of the community.' This was one of the central messages of the Muslim leaders in *A Common Word*. It was also emphasised as a shared obligation by the Archbishop of Canterbury in a statement issued on 11<sup>th</sup> October 2007:

In this country, in which we are together both British citizens and citizens of heaven, love of neighbour could happily be our watchword for the year ahead. My hope is that we will be able to demonstrate the meaning of neighbourly love towards those around us, whether of faith or not.<sup>15</sup>

Levinas emphasises the shared heritage of Islam with Judaism and Christianity and suggests that the monotheism of each obliges members of each to enter into peaceful dialogue:

*it obliges the other to enter into a discourse that unites him with me.* This is a point of the utmost importance... Monotheism, the word of the one and only God, is precisely the word that one cannot help but hear, and cannot help but answer. It is the word that obliges us to enter into discourse. (DF, p. 178)

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<sup>14</sup> The omission of love from *Otherwise than Being* is perhaps related to the way that love can imply an intentionality on the part of the one who loves, which proximity itself disrupts. Todd draws attention to the ambiguity of love in this sense: 'how does love – particularly an intentional love at that – make possible that openness and vigilance that are the markers of responsibility? Rather than simply claiming that love is responsibility,... the more important question ... is to what extent love participates in the conditions of responsibility..., where such radical openness leads to a learning from the Other that lies beyond choice.' (Todd, 2003a, p. 80)

<sup>15</sup> Taken from <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/releases/071011a.htm>, accessed on 1.12.07

In 'Israel and Universalism', Levinas suggests that the basis for entering into dialogue is conscience:

Father Daniélou spoke movingly of the dramatic fate of every religion which, when confronted with others, is torn between charity and truth... Like him, I believe that we must take our conscience from this common civilization and that we must take conscience in common, in order to understand one another.  
(p. 176)

Levinas's idea that on the one hand monotheism obliges us for dialogue, and that on the other conscience obliges us, can be linked to the way in which religion is bound up with *illeity* as the obligation prior to rationality of the self towards the Other.

However, it is not this idea of the obligation towards dialogue that I take to be Levinas's most significant insight for thinking about relations between those of different and no faiths within education. The question Levinas raises is rather how to think again about relations between individuals in education in the light of his notion of the proximity of the neighbour, who elects me, as *élève*, to an elevating responsibility. His notions of *illeity*, concretely manifested in fraternity, and the vulnerability of the neighbour are the most significant insights for enriching how we think about relations between those of different and no religious perspectives within education. Much writing on dialogue in subjects in which it is particularly prominent, for example, religious education, tends to emphasise the importance of reaching shared understanding, and empathising with the Other, as we saw in the previous chapter. They can also make what takes place in dialogue sound, as Julian Stern comments when explaining the place of interfaith dialogue in RE, 'rather glib' (Stern, 2006, p. 22). He outlines how interfaith dialogue is now built into the National Framework for RE (QCA 2004), which states that students should:

'reflect on ... the significance of interfaith dialogue', which should in turn help in 'promoting racial and interfaith harmony and respect for all, combating prejudice and discrimination, contributing positively to community cohesion and promoting awareness of how interfaith cooperation can support the common good.' (ibid.)

Levinas's emphasis on illeity and the traumatic approach of the neighbour draws our attention to the *difficulty* of dialogue, the fact that attending to alterity does impose enormous demands, yet at the same time holds open the idea that it is through potentially difficult dialogues that peace becomes a possibility.

Levinas's approach therefore challenges the view of dialogue that often dominates the way it is practised in education, with emphasis placed on the importance of reaching consensus and mutual understanding. His notion of illeity challenges me to recognise that I can never fully bring my neighbour within my understanding. We can see this emphasis in an essay 'Dialogue: Self-Consciousness and the Proximity of the Neighbor', in which Levinas specifically addresses the way in which an 'absolute distance' between I and You is hollowed out in dialogue, and at the same time, 'there unfolds – or intervenes, disposing the *I* as I and the *you* as you – the extraordinary and immediate relation of dialogue, transcending this distance without suppressing it or recuperating it' (GM, p. 144). This disrupts the focus placed on the importance of recognition by those working within the politics of identity in education, for Levinas emphasises the distance between self and neighbour, and in the surplus of illeity between us, my identity itself is interrupted:

There is in the radical difference between the I and the You, placed in the relationship of dialogue wherein the encounter is formed, not a simple failure of recognition of the one by the other, or of the synthesis of their coincidence and their identification. There is, rather, the surplus or the *better* of a beyond oneself, the surplus and the better of the *proximity* of the neighbor; 'better' than the coincidence with self, despite or because of the difference separating them. 'More' or 'better,' signified in dialogue, not by some supernatural voice interfering in the conversation... 'More' or 'better than' would be the gratuitous gift or the grace of the other's coming to meet me, of which Buber speaks. Yet the surplus of fraternity can go beyond the *satisfactions* that one still expects from gifts, even if gratuitous! (pp. 146-47)

This surplus, the 'better,' within dialogue is a grace that goes beyond the satisfactions of mutuality implied by Buber's *I-Thou*, and there is always a risk that this can degenerate into hostility. Yet Levinas emphasises that it *also* opens the possibility for love:



Dialogue is the non-indifference of the *you* to the *I*, a dis-inter-ested sentiment certainly capable of degenerating into hatred, but a chance for what we must – perhaps with prudence – call love and resemblance in love. In saying this, one is not duped by morality or naively subject to the ideas and values of an environment. It is in the dialogue of transcendence that this idea of the good rises, merely by the fact itself that, in the encounter, the *other* counts above all else. (ibid.)

Here then we see the importance of practices of dialogue in education. Whilst it is impossible to guarantee that they will not lead to hostility, they nevertheless open the possibility of love, of breaking down the walls Žižek spoke of, but not by assumptions of commonality, but rather through realising that between my neighbour, myself and all the others lies absolute distance. So although in addressing me, as we saw in Chapter 1, the neighbour creates a common world between us, he remains beyond my comprehension.

It is, however, not just the transcendence of illeity that is significant for considering practices of dialogue in education, but also Levinas's emphasis on the condition of the neighbour's vulnerability. Although the traditions of the Abrahamic faiths do suggest the idea of the neighbour as a stranger, there is little specific emphasis on the vulnerability of the neighbour. Furthermore, while education tends to emphasise the right of the individual to speak, Levinas's conception of responsibility might lead to an emphasis on listening and attention in dialogue. As Caygill suggests: the rights I have only come from the prior rights of the Other, who as vulnerable addresses me and asks for my response. Thus, 'The origin of rights does not lie in an act of possession but in an event of dispossessing the self before the other' (Caygill, 2002, p. 152), and while this state of dispossession is prior to the ontological, it might seem to imply that further emphasis needs to be given to the often overlooked importance of listening within educational settings of dialogue.<sup>16</sup>

The vulnerability of those involved in the exchanges of dialogue is something that needs to be attended to further, if vulnerability is not to be seen as an excuse for creating barriers between self and neighbour. Butler has drawn on the work of Levinas in

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<sup>16</sup> Todd, in 'Listening as an Attentiveness to Dense Plots', provides an eloquent exploration of what ethical listening might look like within formal education (Todd, 2003a, pp.117-39).

*Precarious Life*, in which she calls for the recognition of vulnerability, which is often covered over and denied, as opening the way for a new humanism and a new road to peace between both nations and individuals:

A vulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter, and there is no guarantee that this will happen. Not only is there always the possibility that a vulnerability will not be recognized and that it will be constituted as 'unrecognizable,' but when a vulnerability is recognized, that recognition has the power to change the meaning and structure of vulnerability itself. (Butler, 2006, p. 43)

Jacqueline Rose also highlights the significance of thinking of mutual vulnerability as the path forward for future peace. She examines psychoanalytic interpretations of vulnerability, how we are commonly in denial of our vulnerability and seek to hide this condition through an attitude of aggression. She considers this in an examination of the way the Shoah has been used to justify violence in the Israel-Palestine conflict and clearly articulates how recognition of shared vulnerability might be a way out of the cycle of hostility. The following passage is troubling and worth quoting at length:

Israeli soldiers are regularly sent on visits to Auschwitz in order to strengthen their resolve. Responding in July 2003 to questions about the killing of Palestinian children by the Israeli army (in the conflict at that time, one in five dead Palestinians was a child), the commander in Gaza starts by taking responsibility: 'Every name of a child here, it makes me feel bad because it's the fault of my soldiers', but by the end of the conversation he has – in the words of the interviewer – returned to being 'combative', invoking the Holocaust as his rationale: 'I remember the Holocaust. We have a choice, to fight the terrorists or to face being consumed again.' There are suicide bombings on the part of the Palestinians in which Israeli children have died; they have rightly been described as unacceptable crimes. But the flames on the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv are not the flames of the Holocaust... What would the situation in Israel-Palestine look like if the commander in Gaza deduced from his 'memory' of the Holocaust, for example, a shared vulnerability of peoples? What kind of nation would Israel become if the state ceased to promote omnipotence as the answer to historical pain? To recall Hareven: 'Even if often in history I have been the victim of others, I will never oppress those weaker than myself and never abuse my power to exile them.' (Rose, 2007, pp. 55-6)

This striking passage mirrors the way in which Levinas's writing seeks to encourage his reader to break the cycle of hostility with *my* actions, *my* recognition of the neighbour's

vulnerability to my words and my actions, and my own situation as vulnerable within the community of neighbours, the community into which we must educate the next generation, but which the next generation is already part of.

It is worth pointing out, however, that Levinas's own comments on the way in which acts of aggression against Palestinians have been justified by reference to historical pain do not always seem to square with the conclusion that Rose reaches, or even with his own ethical positions. In September 1982, two weeks after the massacre of Palestinian refugees at the camps of Sabra and Chatila, Levinas participated in a radio interview with Alain Finkielkraut, addressing questions of Jewish ethics and responsibility. In this, Finkielkraut specifically raised the question of 'the temptation of innocence', or the temptation for Israel to make itself unaccountable because of memories of past horror. In reply, Levinas acknowledged this temptation and emphasised the importance of individual responsibility, but nevertheless invoked the Holocaust, and went on to emphasise that defence is necessary:

No-one has forgotten the Holocaust, it's impossible to forget such things which belong to the most immediate and the most personal memory of every one of us, and pertaining to those closest to us, who sometimes make us feel guilty for surviving. That in no way justifies closing our ears to the voice of men, in which sometimes the voice of God can also resound... I don't at all believe that there are limits to responsibility, that there are limits to responsibility in 'myself'... But I think we should also say that all those who attack us with such venom have no right to do so, and that consequently, along with this feeling of unbounded responsibility, there is certainly a place for a defence, for it is not always a question of 'me', but of those close to me, who are also my neighbours. I'd call such a defence a politics, but a politics that's ethically necessary. (*LR*, pp. 291-92)

Following on from this rather disappointing notion of a politics as defence, which seems at odds with the prophetic ideal we have discussed, Finkielkraut asked about the way in which the war crimes committed at Sabra and Chatila can be justified by 'reason of the State', to which Levinas responded by defending Zionism as both a political *and* ethical ideal (p. 292), but also suggested, in a somewhat evasive manner, that responsibility for the events at Sabra and Chatila is universal. This led the programme's presenter, Salomon Malka, to question directly whether politics should not be seen as 'the very site

of the encounter with the “other”, and for the Israeli, isn’t the “other” above all the Palestinian?’ (p. 294). Levinas’s reply to this was, as Caygill points out, chilling, and seems to contradict the very position we have been exploring on the nature of our relations to alterity:

My definition of the other is completely different. The other is the neighbour, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be. And in that sense, if you’re for the other, you’re for the neighbour. But if your neighbour attacks another neighbour or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong. (*LR*, 294)

It is difficult to give an apologetic response to defend the way in which Levinas’s ethics as articulated, fails the test of his own justice, seemingly refusing to acknowledge the vulnerability of the Palestinian as other<sup>17</sup>. He also fails to acknowledge the contradictions that must arise in ontologically according the State of Israel exemplary ethical and political status. Hand’s critique of Levinas’s responses is justified:

we hear a reluctant recognition of an other that is hurriedly transposed into a regurgitation of published ethical writing or made equivocal through the re-introduction of ontological and political calculations regarding knowing who is right or wrong. Reference to the supreme threat being the one that is posed to books... can also here sound astonishingly naïve or even indifferent in the context of real massacres; while appeal to a Talmudic text... seems here complacently academic, and a comprehension of being that Levinas’s own mature philosophy exposes so convincingly at the heart of Western philosophy. In the admittedly difficult and compromised freedom of a radio interview, Levinas’s reactions seem to fail the test of his own rigorous ethics. (Hand, 2009, pp. 106-7).

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<sup>17</sup> Although Caygill does point out that the closing Talmudic reading of the interview referred to by Levinas could also be interpreted as emphasising the necessity of justice being enacted by Israel, ‘the State of Israel is only justified if it obeys its prophetic call for justice – if it ceases to do so, then its inhabitants will be expelled. The claims of prophetic ethics carried in the books are maintained in their interpretation and will condemn any injustice on the part of a state that claims to act in their name.’ (Caygill, 2002, p. 194)

Space here precludes discussion of several other instances of Levinas's apparent deafness to his own ethics<sup>18</sup>. But rather than further reflecting on these political refusals of the other as weaknesses in Levinas's project, we should see them as demonstrating to us, his readers, the need for our own vigilance, to go beyond Levinas's own texts to recognise not just moments of intolerance and the immunisation against the demands of the other in his work, but to work together as individuals within particular political communities to resist deafness to the demands of neighbours both within and outside our communities, those near, yes, but also those far away, the faceless others who are not immediately present to us and yet whose lives are affected by our actions and inactions. And thus, such an idea of politics goes beyond what Levinas himself seems to elaborate in this interview of a politics defending those close by, but is closer to the idea of a prophetic politics, that Caygill emphasises in his interpretation of Levinas, that will condemn the unjust actions of a state that claims to speak on our behalf.

Levinas's own comments about how it is possible to find in alterity an enemy then should draw our attention to what interfaith dialogue in education must strive to avoid. We have already seen that Levinas suggests that the starting point for dialogue might be the experience of conscience. This moves us beyond the commandment of 'loving the neighbour' as the starting point for working towards peace suggested in *A Common Word*. The obligation to the neighbour we have explored also suggests moving beyond the reciprocal ethics implied in the Abrahamic commandment. For Levinas, the neighbour must come before myself: it is only through responsibility to him, hearing his prior address, that I could be myself. In both the Abrahamic traditions and in Levinas's presentation, the commandment of responsibility to my neighbour comes from a transcendent height. But the authority that compels me to responsibility is in Levinas's presentation invested by its very vulnerability: 'There are two strange things here in the face: its extreme frailty – the fact of being without means and, on the other hand, there is authority. It is as if God spoke through the face' (Levinas, 1988, p. 169). The

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<sup>18</sup> For commentary on these, see Hand, 2002, pp. 96-9, Standish, 2007, p. 89. There is some equivocation over Jewish-Muslim relations in Levinas's writing, for example, *DF* p. 193, but at other times, Levinas emphasises a shared heritage between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, for example *DF*, p. 175. See Caygill, 2002, p. 183 ff. for more extended discussion of this.

responsibility towards this vulnerable stranger, my neighbour, is potentially already there in every relation I have with others, although I am commonly in denial of this: indeed all my interactions with others depend on this prior relation of responsibility.

Within education, Levinas's notion of dialogue based on illeity and deepening responsibility extends the understanding of neighbourly love within the Abrahamic faiths to an ideal that has broader appeal. It encourages us to reassess the ideal of neighbourly love, and yet it is an approach to the neighbour that would surely find acceptance among most strands of the monotheistic faiths. If education could encourage attentiveness to vulnerability and difference, it might be possible to foster relations of non-violence between those of very differing religious sensibilities and between secularists and those of religious faith, of vital importance in the current climate of suspicion and latent hostility harboured by many who feel marginalised because of their religious views. *A Common Word* highlights the importance of working towards common ground in religious understanding:

Finding common ground between Muslims and Christians is not simply a matter for polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders. Christianity and Islam are the largest and second largest religions in the world and in history... making the relationship between these two religious communities the most important factor in contributing to meaningful peace around the world. If Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace. With the terrible weaponry of the modern world, with Muslims and Christians intertwined everywhere as never before, no side can unilaterally win a conflict between more than half the world's inhabitants. Thus our common future is at stake. The very survival of the world is perhaps at stake. (*A Common Word*, pp. 15-6)

We have seen that within religious education there is already seen to be a place for drawing attention to common ground and working towards non-violent relations, but further work needs to be done on the way that other subject disciplines, for example other humanities subjects, might likewise work towards a deeper sense of community and vigilance in the name of peace. This is not a sentimentalised view but one recognising the capacity for violence, whilst also emphasising the possibility of peace and shared vulnerability that lie at the heart of intersubjectivity. This is a vision of increasing

attentiveness to responsibility for the neighbour that is aware of the aporiae of understanding and potential for violence lying between the self and every other. It does not attempt to smooth over and provide facile and false bridges to overcome difference and sees those aporiae as an inescapable part of what it means to stand as a singular, unique subject.

Reading Levinas challenges us to work towards those moments of non-violence which the writers of *A Common Word* are also calling for, in which I begin to attend to and take up the infinite responsibility towards which my neighbour has summoned me. My neighbour is ultimately a stranger to me, transcendent in alterity, but recognising this strangeness and their singular fragility is the foundation of the relation of peace, a peacefulness that lies at the heart of all intersubjectivity, human relations and society. Freud is right that potential hostility is part of the relationship with my neighbour: in summoning me to responsibility, they accuse me, place me in the traumatic and dizzying position of an infinite responsibility for their vulnerability that takes me from my position of self-sufficient enjoyment. But this traumatic accusation also offers the chance of peace, and if one of the tasks of education is to foster peace, then the possibilities this offers for thinking about interreligious dialogue in education provide a challenging ideal for educationalists to heed.

Let us draw this chapter to a close by considering what this means for how we might think of questions of the politics implied in creating a school community, or a community of schools.

### **Education and the Meaning of Community**

In *Beyond Learning*, Biesta draws on Levinas's idea of the Other to develop the idea that within education there are always two 'communities' present: a rational community and an 'other' community. Membership of the rational community enables people to speak as rational agents. In this, people become interchangeable, since what matters is what is said, rather than who speaks, and it is easy to see how institutions of education play an

important role in building and reproducing such rational communities (Biesta, 2006, p. 56). Biesta sees this 'other' community as living within the rational community and interrupting its work, coming 'into presence as soon as one responds to the other, to the otherness of the other, to what is strange in relation to the discourse and logic of the rational community. It comes into existence when one speaks in one's own voice' (p. 66). The 'other community' he describes, following Levinas and Alphonso Lingis, as

the community of those who have nothing in common, the community of strangers, the community without community, is of an ethical nature. The community of those who have nothing in common is constituted by our response to the stranger, the one who asks, seeks – demands, as Levinas would say – *my* response, who seeks to hear *my* unique voice. (p. 65)

Biesta suggests that such a community 'cannot be brought into existence in any deliberate or technical way' (p. 69) and so, as educators, 'The only thing we can do is to make sure that there are at least opportunities to meet and encounter what is different, strange, and other, and also that there are opportunities for our students to really respond, to find their own voice' (ibid.).

This seems a disappointing conclusion, leaving little impetus to challenge the status quo, with the ethical realm relegated to an educational community that seems similar to the 'angelic realm of justice' that Caygill alluded to as problematic when Levinas insists on the distinction between the neighbour and the third. Space here precludes examination of Levinas's own difficult and changing attitudes towards Zionism, but we see clearly in different places in his writing his *hope* that Israel should be the State that enacts justice and the monotheism to which his writing bears witness, for example in 'The State of Caesar and the State of David':

For two thousand years, Israel was uninvolved in History. Innocent of all political crime, ... Israel had become incapable of thinking a politics which would bring to perfection its monotheistic message. Henceforth, the commitment has been made. Since 1948. But all has just begun. Israel is no less isolated in its struggle to complete its extraordinary task than was Abraham, who began it four thousand years ago. (BV, p. 181)



Whilst for many readers, these Zionist commitments and the ethical contortions to which this led Levinas are problematic, they nevertheless demonstrate that the ethical ideal and the idea of community to which Levinas attests suggest rather more than just 'allowing opportunities to meet and encounter... what is strange, and other' (Biesta, 2006, p. 69). But is it possible to say more of what this might mean in practical terms?

One possibility might be the creation of school communities that practically meet the needs of the vulnerable, the poor, the marginalised, attempting to enact a demanding justice. Levinas's own work at the ENIO might be seen in this sense. At a dinner marking his eightieth birthday, Levinas spoke of this work with the importance of a calling:

After Auschwitz, I had the impression that in taking on the directorship of the École Normale Israélite Orientale I was responding to a historical calling. It was my little secret ... Probably the naïveté of a young man. I am still mindful and proud of it today. (Malka, 2006, p. 84)

The ENIO as an educational institution was part of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, which was founded to work for the emancipation of Jews in countries where they had no rights to citizenship, and Levinas clearly saw his work for the schools of the Alliance, as a response to the pressing ethical need for a renewed exploration and renaissance of Jewish spirituality after the Shoah. Levinas's concerns surrounding spirituality and education at this time are demonstrated in the essays of *Difficult Freedom*, and the descriptions of daily life and the curriculum at the school given by Levinas's students reflect likewise Levinas's own vision of Judaism as 'rigorously intellectual, rooted in the textual study, rationalistic, anti-mystical, humanist and universalist'<sup>19</sup> (Critchley, 2002, p. xx). The Jewish education provided by these schools, not funded by the State and seen by Levinas as operating in a sense at distance from the State, is described by Levinas as providing emancipation for Jews of the Mediterranean basin who experienced marginalisation and a struggle for a sense of Jewish identity, and emancipation not

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<sup>19</sup> Something of the day-to-day experience of students at the ENIO at this time is captured in Catherine Chalier and Ami Bouganim's essay 'Emmanuel Levinas: School Master and Pedagogue' (Chalier and Bouganim, 2008, pp. 13-25).

understood in just economic terms (*DF*, p. 285). Such freedom, Levinas suggests, arises through the observance of ritual and attentiveness to texts, rather than through imposing totalitarian constraints to freedom:

Jewish education does not rely on the ineffective brutality of constraints imposed by the totalitarian State in order to maintain a law within freedom and guarantee freedom through law. It associates generous ideas with the discipline that is prerequisite to ritual, the distance taken with regard to the self and nature. (*DF*, p. 288)

This might seem to suggest a Jewish particularist account of education that many today would find unpalatable, yet the idea of a community emerging in the faithful and disciplined attentiveness to shared texts and ritual, which we see in Levinas's own hermeneutical approach, is all too often lacking in conceptions of community that privilege the mastering of rational discourse as what unites, or what *should* unite us (for example, in Habermas's *Pragmatics of Communication*, 1999). In a sense, Levinas might be seen in these schools as attempting to enact a just political and ethical education, creating 'other' communities in a very real way, not as some 'angelic order of justice', through encouraging attentiveness and responsibility to traditions, rituals and texts, and to practices of discourse and dialogue, an ethical responsibility of universal significance.

We also see this emphasis on attentiveness to reading present when discussing his other role in education, as a professor within a university and therefore within State funded formal education:

I encountered many difficulties in preparing my courses. I always felt better when I was borne by a text and a commentary. The construction of a systematic course, the anticipation of all questions and objections, always seems to me abstract and artificial. (*RB*, p. 79)

Here we see that Levinas's thought seems to lead away from the idea of teaching in a community in which all can be planned for in an economy of exchange, towards an idea of teaching taking place in fidelity to both texts and to the demands and unexpected encounters that arise between teacher and students. And it is this triangulation of fidelity and relationship between teachers, students, and the content of the curriculum, and the

infinite demand that solicits an attentiveness and a hospitality as a surplus beyond institutionalised roles, aims and objectives, that is surely intrinsic to any understanding of educative community following on from Levinas.

Although the texts Levinas refers to are philosophical texts in his work as a professor, and Scripture in his work at the ENIO, the idea of 'fidelity to texts' that I am suggesting implies a broader understanding of what is textual. In this sense, it is possible to see the traditions of subject disciplines as texts that require attentiveness and disciplined reading. This is not, however, simply to be an apologist for the canon. To 'read' in this way suggests, as Levinas describes in his reading of the Talmud, 'a reading in search of problems and truths' (TR, p. 9) rather than 'the litany or pious murmur of a consent given beforehand' (p. 8). Reading in this sense is required of both teachers and students, and can be compared to the initiation into truth-procedures that Badiou suggests as an ideal for education, requiring fidelity in appropriating the meaning of the truth within the coordinates of the current state of the situation. As I argued in Chapter 4, such an approach suggests the need for more curricular autonomy for teachers, in choosing which are the texts that they recognise as of significant importance to their discipline and that they feel their students should have the opportunity to engage with, and which might come to define educational communities in this sense. One of the primary reasons influencing the choice to become a secondary school teacher is love of one's subject<sup>20</sup>, and we should have more faith in the judgements of those so motivated about what texts they see as revealing truths, and which they see as worthy of passing on to the next generation.

In addition to this demand for reading, Levinas's emphasis on the discipline of ritual in Jewish education as linked to freedom is challenging. Although Levinas is concerned with specifically Jewish rituals, this nevertheless raises the question of how rituals constitute community in schools today. The idea of rituals in school life has been treated with political suspicion: in his provocative *Schooling as a Ritual Performance*, Peter

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<sup>20</sup> For research on this, see, for example, [http://pdfserve.informaworld.com/313757\\_751264654.pdf](http://pdfserve.informaworld.com/313757_751264654.pdf), accessed 14.08.09

McLaren, for example, analyses how capitalist ideologies and the logic of consumption and conformity are transmitted through ritualised classroom practices (1999).<sup>21</sup> But this need not be the case. Although rituals can be used in ways that perpetuate and further reinforce existing injustices, as McLaren highlights, Levinas's emphasis on the importance of disciplined performance of ritual within Jewish education leads me to question what kind of rituals might interrupt totalising logics and lead to a deeper sense of community. Given that schooling *inevitably* involves ritualised performances, further attention needs to be given to the question of which rituals are desirable: which rituals would enable the development of more just school communities, and communities with a sense of obligation not just to neighbours within those communities but to neighbours outside that particular educational space? This is a challenging question to consider, and it would be totalising to impose a set of rituals within any kind of national framework for education, 'the ineffective brutality of constraints imposed by the totalitarian State' (*DF*, p. 288), but is a question that should rather be addressed at the level of individual schools. In relation to the rituals Levinas emphasises, the performance of religious rituals does seem to imply exclusiveness in the membership of a religious community, and in relation to the idea of 'common schools', it is difficult to consider what kinds of rituals would be desirable or acceptable – certainly the rituals Levinas speaks of, embedded in thousands of years of history, seem to operate in a different space from and have no obvious counterpart with what might count as rituals within common schools today.

But perhaps the question of considering what kind of rituals might lead to a better sense of community, even if that encourages some degree of exclusiveness within a distinctive educational community, is an unavoidable question. It could be argued that the distinctiveness of particular educational communities is not something to be feared, as it

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<sup>21</sup> He describes schooling and the Catholic schooling he researched in particular as 'a site of surveillance and the marking and reproduction of power, where working-class bodies are located as inferior, quarantined within designated spaces of formal identity, dissected by the white gaze of power, masticated by the jaws of capital, made receptive to the command metaphors of formal citizenship, and, and transformed into semiotic battlegrounds where the capitalist law of value and the law of the Father become sanctified in the daily pedagogical practices.' (McLaren, 1999, p. xxxiii)



all too often is in educational discourses that demonstrate a desire for homogeneity.<sup>22</sup> Further attention needs to be paid to the question of how to create educational communities which are bound together with an orientation of responsibility and hospitality towards those who are *not* educated within those particular communities, a desire to protect and welcome the stranger. Given the way in which exclusiveness can lead to exclusion in violent and unjust terms, the creation of educational communities in this sense might be seen as a fine risk. Yet given the way that current educational systems *already* lead to exclusion, as McLaren highlights, and in the way Žižek suggests is symptomatic of our current situation, this is surely a fine risk that must be run.

This idea of community, rooted in illeity and manifested in a fraternity that reads texts vigilantly and attentively, provides a more compelling vision for ideas of responsibility in education than ideas of shared rationality or social contract ethics as foundational. Caygill points out that in 'Reflections on Hitlerism', Levinas warns that liberalism, with its focus on autonomy, freedom and equality, but without communal narratives, is left without a strong basis for community, and thus it is left vulnerable to proposals for exclusivist communities, which are

opposed to freedom and equality, such as the national, confessional, class and, more ominously, racial fraternities that pervade modernity and are able through their own dramatic narratives of repentance and redemption to exploit the deficit of liberal rationalism. (Caygill, 2002, p. 35)

For Levinas, rather than autonomy or rationality, it is infinite responsibility for the vulnerable neighbour, a responsibility beyond thematisation that is the beginning of the possibility of such ideals as equality and reciprocity.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to debate the relative merits of private schools and institutions of education operating with relative independence from the operations of

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<sup>22</sup> This desire for homogeneity and normalising standards is extending beyond schools, for example in the National Curriculum, to higher education also. The call from some politicians, within both the Labour and Conservative parties, for universal standards for degrees, tougher inspection and central codes of admission, seen by many as a direct attack on the independence of universities, is discussed at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2009/aug/02/university-degree-comparison-oxford>, accessed 15.08.09.

government. At this present time, it is difficult to conceive of British schoolteachers operating with anything like the curricular autonomy that Levinas possessed at the ENIO. Their situation is perhaps closer to the institutional role Levinas had as university professor,<sup>23</sup> though with less autonomy than Levinas enjoyed in that role because of the climate of managerialism, as analysed in Chapter 4. But the conception of community in education to which Levinas leads us is one in which the obligation to the neighbour is the beginning, end, and meaning of community, rather than the emphasis of community arising out of commonality or shared rationality. This is not to say that shared rationality is not important, as I have emphasised in preceding chapters, but rather to see that my capability for discourse and dialogue is only possible because of responsibility to my neighbour, as a gift arising from their prior address. Masschelein and Simons suggests that such an understanding of community should lead to a different way of thinking about education, and on the place of language and therefore of dialogue, than the emphasis on contractual responsibilities that seek to lay out exactly what our responsibilities are:

our plea is for the continuance of the conception of education and teaching as a relation of transfer or transmission – although not simply a continuance as this must also involve reformulation. Perhaps, better, it is a relation of giving and receiving. We speak indeed of giving words or giving a language. But the giving of a language, giving words, means that we do not know, and that we cannot know, exactly what we give and what we receive. (Masschelein and Simons, 2002, p. 605)

My condition of being taught depends on the anarchic condition of responsibility. I am always already a subject in community, yet called to bring about a better community, a community of neighbours in which we work towards the conditions of justice and fraternity that Levinas testifies to, breaking down the walls Žižek speaks of through practices of dialogue that do not cover over the conditions of illeity and vulnerability that

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<sup>23</sup> We should also note, however, that Levinas had another vision for higher education, in the hopes he expresses for the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which will ‘translate into a modern idiom the wisdom of the Talmud, to confront it with the problems of our time’ (*TR*, p. 9). This task, which makes the university both universal *and* situated within a concrete locality Levinas describes as ‘the most noble essence of Zionism’ (*ibid.*). Levinas acknowledges however that this work of education through translation, a universal calling, is too bold a vision for other locations: ‘The Diaspora, stuck in its living forces by Hitlerism, no longer has either the knowledge or the courage needed for the realization of such a project’ (p. 10), and of course, he himself worked within a university as a state funded, secular institution of higher education.

would make such a community possible. This community and this education are clearly not limited to institutions of formal education. Yet considering the way in which Levinas saw his own pedagogical work within educational institutions as of deep political and ethical significance, I am left questioning how we might understand and deepen our understanding of the anarchic ethical responsibilities that teachers in schools currently face, in a very different political climate, in the day-to-day demands of their work. To the question of what teachers *can* do in response to Levinas's prophetic attestation of ethical and political subjectivity, let us now turn.

## Chapter 7

# Political Disappointment, Education and the Anarchic Ethical Subject

Support yourself  
by inconsistencies:  
two fingers  
snap in the abyss, in  
scribblebooks  
a world rushes up, this depends  
on you (Celan, cited in *M*, p. 105)

What would it mean, supported by inconsistencies, for the world rushing up to depend on me? Badiou uses this poem to consider the idea that an edict of justice that can overturn and interrupt the injustice of ‘the usual course of conservative politics’ is always uttered in subjectivity before community. Following on from considering the meaning of community in education in the previous chapter, in this final chapter I will explore what it could mean to think of political subjectivity within an educative community. This will be an understanding of political subjectivity beginning in response to situated injustices and political disappointments, read together with Levinas’s writing on the an-archy of ethical subjectivity. In the preceding chapter, I acknowledged that it is difficult to conceive of teachers enjoying the freedom to create a community of schools acting at a distance from the State, and therefore our analysis must begin with the current situation in education, which is, for the reasons I have considered in Chapters 3 and 4, politically disappointing. I will begin therefore by considering the question of political



disappointment and how a common response to this within educational theory has been a discourse of hope. I will then explore how Levinas and Badiou offer us an alternative approach to hope, more motivating than the utopian conceptions more usually offered, and enriching our sense of the possibilities of political subjectivity within education.

### **Philosophy and Political Disappointment**

One of the most prominent recent considerations of the challenges of Levinas for thinking about political subjectivity and action has been Critchley's *Infinitely Demanding*. Here he argues, as mentioned earlier, that philosophy does not begin in the experience of wonder, but in the experience of disappointment, 'the indeterminate but palpable sense that something desired has not been fulfilled, that a fantastic effort has failed' (Critchley, 2007, p.1). He focuses on two forms of disappointment: religious and political, both of which he sees as giving rise to philosophy. Religious disappointment, he suggests, is experienced when religious belief systems and traditions become no longer believable, leading to a sense of meaninglessness, and nihilism. 'Nihilism', he writes, 'is this declaration of meaninglessness, a sense of indifference, directionlessness or, at its worst, despair that can flood into all areas of life' (p. 2). The philosophical response to this he sees exemplified in Nietzsche's attempt to think through the fact that what had been seen as the foundation of meaning had become meaningless. I would question whether this theme of religious disappointment makes itself so pressingly felt as Critchley seems to suggest: whilst many may experience a sense of nihilistic meaninglessness in life, I am not sure that this is necessarily in response to any kind of religious disappointment, or sense that 'God is dead' in the Nietzschean sense.<sup>1</sup> His outline of political disappointment is more compelling. This he sees as 'the sense of something lacking or failing aris[ing] from the realization that we inhabit a violently *unjust* world, a world defined by the horror of war, a world where, as Dostoevsky says, blood is being spilt in the merriest way, as if it were champagne' (p.

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<sup>1</sup> Predictions of the demise of religion are also questionable. As Reza Aslan writes, 'Despite all the confident predictions one hears about the death of God, the truth is that religion is a stronger, more global force today than it has been in generations. At the dawn of the twentieth century, one half of the world's population identified itself as Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, or Hindu. One hundred years of social progress, technological innovation, and scientific advancement, and that number stands now at nearly two thirds' (Aslan, 2009, p. 10).

3). Political disappointment is related to awareness of injustices in the world, but also a disappointment at wrongs within political systems, ranging from current anger at MPs' expenses, to the corrosion of political structures through a politics of fear. The response to such disappointment that philosophy takes up, Critchley suggests, is the question of justice: what does justice mean, or what kind of justice do we seek, in the world we inhabit? Critchley outlines and rejects two possible responses to such disappointment: a passive nihilism that retreats from the injustices of the world in mysticism, contemplation and meditation, and active nihilism and other forms of revolutionary vanguardism, that seek to destroy the current order of things, which he sees exemplified in Al-Qaeda, using the resources of capitalist globalisation against that very system itself<sup>2</sup>. Critchley rejects these approaches that attempt to either retreat from or destroy the current order of things. What is needed instead, he suggests, is to think through and begin working out of the situation in which we find ourselves:

We have to resist the temptation of nihilism and face up to the hard reality of the world. What does that reality teach us? It shows violent injustice here and around the world; it shows growing social and economic inequalities here and around the world; it shows that the difference between what goes on here and around the world is increasingly fatuous. It shows the populations of the well-fed West governed by fear of outsiders, whose current names are 'terrorist', 'immigrant', 'refugee' or 'asylum seeker'. It shows populations turning inward towards some reactionary and xenophobic conception of their purported identity, something which is happening in a particularly frightening manner all across Europe at present. It shows that because of the excessive diet of sleaze, deception, complacency and corruption liberal democracy is not in the best of health. It shows, in my parlance, massive political disappointment. (pp. 6-7)

We can see in the way that Levinas addresses concrete problems of injustice, for example in the essays of *Difficult Freedom* and his work at the ENIO, and the way in which he situates his work as a response to the presentiment and mourning of the Nazi horror, that he was concerned to begin thinking out of the situation in which he found himself, even if at times the difficulty of his philosophical expression can make that response seem somewhat abstract. Within the present

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<sup>2</sup> See for example the Retort group's discussion of this in *Afflicted Powers*, for example the coding language used by al-Qaida: 'Directives were encrypted in a quaint corporate language – terror was "commercial activity", bin Laden was dubbed the "contractor", the Taliban became the "Omar Brothers Company" – but at the same time made use of the Allied Forces' cryptographic system used in World War Two. Al-Qaida ... was from the start a modern virtual organization, or more properly, a modern network with a decentralized cell structure' (Retort, 2006, p. 152).

situation that we find ourselves, it is difficult to disagree with Critchley's diagnosis of the disappointing nature of current political systems, leading to a desire for a new approach to politics, which has become palpable in the wake of the unprecedented debt crisis of 08/09 and in Britain over the disappointment and anger about MPs expenses. We can see this sense of disappointment, anger and a desire for something new in the rhetoric used by those working across the political spectrum, from *The Guardian's* 'New Politics' thread - stating that 'public dissatisfaction with politics has never been greater: a national debate is needed on what must change'<sup>3</sup> - to Philip Blond's assertion that we are 'at one of those epoch changing moments in British political history', marking 'a paradigm shift, an utter and complete reversal of the pre-existing order and the arrival of something new, something revolutionary and something transformative' (Blond, 2009, p. 1). This leads me to question how teachers respond to political disappointment with current systems of education. To what extent do they feel that education is politically disappointing, and what does this mean for how we think about their political subjectivity? Indeed, what does that phrase even mean? Let us turn to consider the way in which educational theorists have expressed and responded to political disappointment.

### **Education, Disappointment, Hope**

There are many ways the idea of political disappointment in education could be thematised and I do not wish to provide an exhaustive survey. Disappointment ranges from the ways in which the political role of teachers has been conceived as the answer to all societal ills, and the lack of support they are given for this, to broader disappointment that schools become the site of reproduction of existing social inequalities. David Halpin opens his *Hope and Education* with a thoroughly depressing article by a 46-year old male teacher from the *Times Educational Supplement*. It is worth quoting this at length to illustrate the profound disillusionment that teachers can feel, and how those experiencing disappointment do *not* necessarily see it as leading to a paradigm shift:

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/series/politics-and-reform>, accessed 28.08.09



I work with 14-year old children who have 39-year old grandparents, whose families are fourth or fifth generation unemployed and whom the police deem 'out of control'. Many started their sex lives at 12 and already smoke and drink heavily. We manage and they pass some exams, but they won't get jobs because there aren't any ... My office is a chair in the staff room and I don't have a personal phone or computer terminal. The windows and roof leak ... It is cold in winter and too hot in the summer ... Some of my classes have more than 30 children, all of which have a right to individual attention and some of which have special needs. I haven't had a full set of textbooks in years and produce photocopies and worksheets in my own time. If children misbehave, it is apparently my fault for inadequate child-management skills. I have been hectorred by the press, badgered by parents, pressured by the management, and insulted by politicians, just for being a teacher ... I've worked through innumerable Secretaries of State for Education, and I feel that I can wear my despair and cynicism as the professional equivalent of a long service and good conduct medal ... I am a good teacher because I appreciate and like children. I enjoy my subject, and I admire learning, but I am going to need a lot of help to trust a politician again. The Government and my management will have to support me in order to get back some of the loyalty and sense of vocation that has been squandered needlessly. The years to retirement are going to be a long, hard haul and if I could leave teaching, I'd go tomorrow .... I'm not sure I have much hope or faith left. (TES, 6 November 1998, in Halpin, 2003, pp. 10-1)

Halpin points out that such an assessment must be read alongside more positive accounts of teaching. However, while it reports a single case of massive disappointment, I am sure that any schoolteacher would recognise parts of his account. Halpin also points to figures issued by the Teacher Training Agency suggesting that many of those becoming teachers today do not regard it necessarily as a job for life and higher numbers are seeking early retirement (pp. 11-2).<sup>4</sup>

Beyond this individual case, educational researchers have explored other disappointments with educational structures, policies and practices in numerous fields, often, as in the example above, expressing a view that teachers feel that there is little that *they* can do to effect change, both at the level of educational systems and at the level of teacher-student interactions. As Julian Edgoose writes, 'As educational policies like testing and media influences are increasingly

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<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, research carried out by Alan Smithers and Pamela Robinson from the University of Buckingham's Centre for Education and Employment shows that in recent years, the drop-out rate in teacher training courses in Britain is 15%, with a further 28% failing to take up a teaching post once they graduate, see <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/alarm-at-rising-dropout-rate-for-student-teachers-876794.html>, accessed 12.08.09.

guided by global concerns, teachers feel powerless to effect students. They have less curricular freedom, yet perhaps also fewer ideas about how their teaching might make a difference' (Edgoose, 2008, p. 100). It seems that many teachers feel the opposite of the sense in the Celan poem that the world, rushing up, depends on them. In the last twenty years, much of the political disappointment expressed by educational theorists has been in response to the adoption of policies of marketisation and economic managerialism in education, as explored in Chapter 4, with the language used about education increasingly shifting towards the idea that it is a service, of which either students or their parents are the consumers. Giroux, for example, lambasts the way in which neoliberal education policies have led to a distortion of the goals of education in response to the demands of the marketplace:

Teachers are under siege like they have never been in the past, and schools are assaulted relentlessly by the powerful forces of neoliberalism, which want to turn them into sources of profit. What is good for Disney and Microsoft is now the protocol for how we define schooling, learning and the goals of education. Schools are no longer considered a public good but a private good and the only form of citizenship increasingly being offered to young people is consumerism. (Giroux, 2001, p. xxii)

The critique of neoliberal education policies in America and Britain has been so extensively explored elsewhere that I do not intend to revisit the arguments here (see for example, Apple, 2000, Bridges and Jonathan, 2003, McLaren, 2006). Various responses within education theory however do seem to correspond to Critchley's thesis that philosophy arises from disappointment, and much educational research can be seen as constituting a form of resistance, an attempt to stand at a distance from the state in order to articulate the present situated injustice and propose a more just alternative.

In responding to disappointment, several educational theorists have consciously used a discourse of hope. Giroux, for example, following his provocative critique of how the market ideology of hypercapitalism has monopolised education at all levels, concludes *Theory and Resistance in Education* with a note of hope of the possibility of an education otherwise, and the need for educators to have faith in the idea of creating a more just society, rooted in 'a concrete

utopianism' (Giroux, 2001, p. 242). Halpin has likewise argued for the need for hope in response to political disappointment, arguing that hope as the exercise of a utopian imagination will allow us to think of alternative responses to current educational wrongs and injustices and therefore offer relief from cynicism and 'debilitating pessimism' about the possibility of change:

Applying the utopian imagination to such problems ... can lead to very different outcomes. Certainly, by facilitating the process of temporarily putting to one side our assumptions about the existing order of things and the current supposed limits of change, it assists the development of radical, previously untried and potentially successful policies for education ... [U]topianism provides a justification for considering the previously inconceivable without fear of embarrassment or premature contradiction (Halpin, 2003, p. 9).

Is this language of hope, rooted in a 'concrete utopianism' the most helpful response to political disappointment? It clearly offers one way of resisting the pessimism that can be the response to disappointment, but how does it relate to the way that teachers themselves respond to what they find disappointing in education?

If we turn to research conducted into the ways that teachers respond to unliked policy changes, we can see that the response to disappointment 'at the chalk face' is complex. As the teacher cited by Halpin suggests, many teachers feel powerless to resist policy changes that they regard with ambivalence or hostility. This we can see documented in the research carried out by Alex Moore and others. In 'Compliance, Resistance and Pragmatism', Moore and his co-researchers document the findings of a major research study showing that after initial hostility to new policy initiatives, following the New Labour victory of 1997, teachers became far less openly oppositional to what were initially unpopular educational policies, and teachers were *happy* to describe themselves as pragmatic instead of political. One primary schoolteacher in their study, for example, expresses this position:

I think that the problem with education too often in the past is that it ... polarised politically .... And because New Labour haven't polarised it, in a sense it's a bit more difficult to make those distinctions. I think that people [now] are much more pragmatic in the methods they use. So things like pupil grouping don't become a political issue so much. You are actually looking at the evidence, you are looking at

the research and what works best for the kids, what are the pros and cons (Moore et al., 2002, p. 562).

The authors suggest that this language of pragmatism reflects the way that during the period of their study, teachers' self-identification reflected their 'buying into the emergent dominant discourse of pragmatism', operative in the 'Third Way' politics of New Labour, which became a 'force of conservatism ... an ideology at whose centre, paradoxically, is a critical *opposition* to ideology and therefore, by implication, to politics' (p. 563). The authors suggest that at the time of their research, the question of the political subjectivity of teachers became a matter of the gradual accommodation and colonisation of thinking in alignment with dominant pragmatist discourses. This may have initially been a coping strategy in response to new initiatives, but has become, they argue, a process of depoliticisation, 'in which the inclination to mobilise for active, collective political opposition is diverted ... to more isolated engagements in the internal politics of their own institutions' (p. 564). Their article was published in 2002. If we fast-forward to today, have times changed?

Reading a recent issue of the NASUWT's<sup>5</sup> magazine for its membership, it would appear not. Although one might expect the teachers who are on the executive of this union to be among the more obviously politicised members of the profession, in the way in which Moore et al. use the term political as 'characterised by argument, passion and debate', the language used by members of the executive focuses on 'better management' in a tone that is in clear alignment with the dominance of economic managerialism within current political systems,<sup>6</sup> and throughout the publication there is excessive focus on improving the working conditions of teachers. This was exemplified in the way in which members of the NASUWT responded to the plan to end SATS for 11-year-olds, threatening to strike if the tests were abolished, arguing that if the tests were

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<sup>5</sup> The National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) is the largest teaching union in the UK.

<sup>6</sup> For example, an NASUWT executive member, when asked 'what makes a good headteacher?' replied: 'You may well have the qualifications, training and perceived skills and competencies, but good leadership depends on how you manage teaching and learning and most importantly how you manage people' (*Teaching Today*, May 2009, Issues 67, p. 14).



abolished, the workload for teachers would become intolerable.<sup>7</sup> Clearly this *was*, contra Moore et al., an example of teachers being mobilised into a collective political opposition, but not because of discontent with current educational systems, but out of conservatism: a desire to *keep* the status quo.

However, this does not tell the whole story. In contrast with the NASUWT's proposed action to strike if Key Stage 2 SATS are dropped, delegates at the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) conferences this year *have* voted overwhelmingly to boycott SATS next year over ideological opposition to what they represent.<sup>8</sup> Proposing the resolution for industrial action, Steve Iredale of the NAHT's National Council pronounced: 'The Department for Children, Schools and Families' industry of mechanising the education system, reducing it to numerical nonsense, must be stopped once and for all.' While Ed Balls was making efforts to avert the resolution to strike, the former president of the NAHT, Sue Sayles, described the decision to strike as a moral decision: 'It's our moral duty personally, within our local branches and as a national association, to show Ed that we have balls'.<sup>9</sup> The actions of teachers resisting other forms of assessment and surveillance strategies imposed by school managers can also be seen within individual schools. Two teachers, in an article for *The Guardian*, give an account of how teachers in their school responded to the installation of CCTV cameras in their classrooms by refusing to teach in those rooms:

Earlier this year, on a school day like any other, we shuffled into our politics class at 11.20 on a Monday morning. What we didn't notice straight away were four tinted CCTV domes hanging from the ceiling including a huge monitor dome staring right at us. Confusion and anger broke out among us. A teacher casually stated that they were for teacher training purposes. After a thought of 'God, George Orwell was

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2009/apr/16/teachers-sats-nasuwt-strike>, accessed 12.08.09, for discussion of this.

<sup>8</sup> Although the resolution would have to be passed through a ballot of members of both unions before it could go ahead, and the government have argued that industrial action on this issue would be illegal.

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2009/may/02/headteachers-sats-boycott-ed-balls> for coverage of NAHT conference, accessed 13.08.09



right', some of us angrily packed up and left – we weren't comfortable working in a classroom with cameras.<sup>10</sup>

The students supported their teachers' decision to boycott those teaching rooms, and eventually, the school management turned the cameras off in response to their action. If the research carried out by Moore suggests that in 2002, the teaching profession was becoming depoliticised, are these incidents signs that teachers are becoming repoliticised, and no longer aligning their thinking to conform to policy changes they regard with hostility?

Let us turn now to consider an alternative conception of political subjectivity, following from the reading of Levinas I have been developing in the preceding chapters, which takes seriously the view that teachers are not in the process of being de- or re-politicised, but are always already political and ethical subjects, rooted in an an-archic conception of ethical subjectivity that leads towards an alternative conception of hope.

### **An-archism, Levinas and Ethical Protest**

Let me begin this section by returning to Critchley's claim that philosophy begins in the experience of disappointment. Critchley described how two responses to political disappointment were active and passive nihilism: a retreat from or attempt to destroy the present order of things. He also suggests that disappointment with what political parties stand for can have a positive effect in leading to a renewed sense of the urgency of political activism outside of electoral systems. He cites activities of the anti-globalisation movements, indigenous rights groups, and the work of various NGOs and other activist networks as examples of these approaches to political activism operating outside of traditional electoral forms of politics. Criticising and rejecting the Leninist idea that the state should and will wither away, he argues:

politics must be conceived at a distance from the state, taking up a distance in a specific situation. More specifically, at a time when the state is seeking to saturate and control more and more areas of social life, I claim that the task of radical

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<sup>10</sup> Their article is at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/libertycentral/2009/jun/03/cctv-classroom>, accessed 13.08.09

political articulations is the creation of *interstitial* distance within the state territory (Critchley, 2007, p. 92).

Critchley names the operation of such a politics, acting at a distance from the state, neo-anarchism. There is a doubling of meaning in the way that he uses the term, gesturing towards ethical anarchism and political neo-anarchism, both of which he sees as entwined. He explains his use of the term as following Levinas's use of the term to critique the 'archic' idea of subjectivity that Levinas describes as dominant within post-Enlightenment philosophy:

On Levinas's view ... it is the sovereign, self-positing subject that has dominated modern philosophy since Descartes, where the *archè* or principle governing selfhood is autarchy, understood as self-origination or self-legislation. Against this, Levinas argues that ethical subjectivity is affected by the other in a way that places in question the self's purported sovereignty and autonomous majesty. In this sense, the ethical relation to the other is anarchical, which, for Levinas, is not devoid of political significance. (p. 93)

Before we examine how far this idea of an-archy relates to political neo-anarchism, as Critchley suggests, let us consider how Levinas uses the term. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas introduces the term in the pivotal chapter, 'Substitution'. Here he proposes that an-archy is an interruption of the *archè* of a self-positing subject, that through its own autonomy puts itself in place, sovereign over itself. In contrast with this, Levinas describes the an-archy of the subject, prior to and irreducible to consciousness, that disturbs the idea of any overarching or totalising principle or origin of subjectivity. This is, as Critchley highlights, a critique of the Kantian idea of autonomy, 'where each moral subject would be sovereign over itself insofar as it was freely determined by the moral law', but has a history before Kant: 'we might think of this self-positing in terms of the *res cogitans* in Descartes as the Archimedean point of certainty that arrests the movement of doubt' (p. 121). Levinas sees this idea of the self-positing subject continued in the ontology of Heidegger, for whom, as Critchley describes, 'the anticipatory resoluteness of authentic Dasein is simply a more existential version of self-positing autarchy' (ibid.). Levinas criticises any self-positing idea of subjectivity as ultimately a form of egoism: 'It is the very egoism of the ego that posits itself as its own origin, an uncreated, sovereign principle, a prince' (CP, p. 138).

For Levinas, as we have seen in the preceding chapters, ethics must be rooted not in the self, but in the disturbance of the self through the approach of the other. I have already emphasised that this disturbance of the idea of the sovereign self through the other approaching and electing it as one responsible has political significance for Levinas. As Caygill suggests:

By locating the consistency of his life and signature between the presentiment and the memory of political horror, Levinas unambiguously aligned his philosophical work with the thinking of the political, or, more precisely, with the thinking of political horror. (Caygill, 2002, p. 5)

Given this alignment between his philosophy and his memory of political horror, Levinas's attempt to expose the limitations of subjectivity conceived in terms of a certain understanding of self-positing autonomy that can lead to totalitarianism and the refusal to accept difference, must be seen as already a political as well as an ethical conceptualisation of subjectivity. It is also worth emphasising again that while developing these philosophical positions, he was also responding to very concrete political problems related to 'the Jewish ordeal' (*RB*, p. 39) in his pedagogical work at the ENIO, a profession he described, as I have already mentioned, as 'responding to a historical calling' (Malka, 2006, p. 84).

An-archy is a term that became increasingly prominent in Levinas's essays published before *Otherwise than Being*. It is one of several terms used to interrupt this ideal of the self-governing subject that Levinas argues has dominated Western philosophy, and that, as we saw in Chapter 3, has been an important ideal within education. We have seen why Levinas argued that such an ideal can lead to totalitarianism and political horror. What is specific to this term an-archy, as Levinas uses it, is this sense that the approach of the other, my responsibility for her, disrupts both senses of the term *archè* in its double meaning of principle and origin. In the 1969 essay, 'The Name of God According to a Few Talmudic Texts', we see Levinas emphasising how the idea of origin is foundational for rationality in Western philosophy, within the ontological approach he is aiming to interrupt: 'Being has an origin: it is *arkhe*. In Western philosophy, rationality is identified with the search for an origin. It is essentially archaeology' (*BV*, p.125).

In contrast, responsibility affects me anarchically, without origin or reason, resistant to thematisation, through the thirdness of illeity as we explored in the previous chapter. I am affected by the demand of my neighbour 'Anarchically, without beginning in a present, without beginning at all' (*BV*, p. 126).

In *Otherwise than Being*, this an-archic responsibility of subjectivity is described, as we saw in Chapter 2, in terms of an 'obsession', affecting and disturbing my spontaneity and sovereignty:

irreducible to consciousness, even if it overwhelms it... Obsession traverses consciousness, countercurrentwise, it is inscribed in consciousness as something foreign, a disequilibrium, a delirium. It undoes thematization, and escapes any *principle*, origin, will or *αρχή*, which are put forth in every ray of consciousness. This movement is, in the original sense of the term, an-archic. (*OB*, p. 101)

The an-archic ethical subject, as we have seen, emerges from its self-unbinding, from my neighbour's appeal, confronting me with her need, looking for the response I alone can give. This responsibility undoes my self-possession. While it might demand of me a justification for my actions, responsibility itself is:

*justified by no prior commitment*, in the responsibility for another – in an ethical situation - ... the me-ontological<sup>11</sup> and metalogical structure of this anarchy takes form, undoing the logos in which the apology by which consciousness always regains its self-control, and commands, is inserted ... The consciousness is affected, then, before forming an image of what is coming to it, affected in spite of itself. (p. 102)

In 'Humanism and An-archy', Levinas describes an-archy as 'the trace of an immemorial past'<sup>12</sup> (*CP*, p. 136), pre-original passivity, prior to freedom.

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<sup>11</sup> 'Me-ontological' indicates non-ontological, or concerned with non-being, or what might remain outside of ontology, from the Greek prefix *μη* / *mē* 'non', and here Levinas uses the term to indicate that it is in the ethical situation of being called to responsibility that this anarchy of subjectivity takes form, but that this is outside of ontology and as metalogical, beyond logic.

<sup>12</sup> This trace is described as 'immemorial' because it can never be remembered, for to remember it would be to bring it to consciousness, thematisation and our own modes of temporalisation. The trace, as transcendent, can therefore never fully be present or brought into the order – the *arche* – of the world.

The an-archic subject's ethicality is rooted then in its sensibility to the demand that is addressed to it, rather than any overarching principle or foundation, or free decision on my part. This responsibility shatters self-sufficiency and exceeds any law that could be imposed on me. It also troubles the work of the state, because, as Caygill writes,

The ethical subject is never under law, but always in pursuit of the promised land of goodness that – an infinite territory – is ever beyond it. The promised land consists in the pursuit rather than the attainment, for the nomadic ethical subject can never arrive at infinity; accomplishment of the duty to the other provokes more responsibility. The self in this way is 'deepened' by the experience of an infinite responsibility and becomes a singularity that cannot be subsumed under the law of a totality: the 'work of justice' exceeds the 'work of the state' (Caygill, 2002, p. 126).

We can see from this passage how Levinas's conceptualisation of the ethical subject as an-archic might lead Critchley to connect this with political neo-anarchism. But is this a theme we find in Levinas's own articulation of an-archic subjectivity?

In a footnote to 'Principle and Anarchy', Levinas comments on how his understanding of anarchical subjectivity relates to political anarchism:

The notion of anarchy we are introducing here has a meaning prior to the political (or antipolitical) meaning currently attributed to it. It would be self-contradictory to set it up as a principle (in the sense that the anarchists understand it). Anarchy cannot be sovereign, like an *arche*. It can only disturb the State – but in a radical way, making possible moments of negation *without any* affirmation. The State then cannot set itself up as a Whole. (*OB*, p. 194n4)

Critchley interprets this to imply that Levinas's understanding of anarchy means a disturbance of the state, 'a disruption of the state's attempt to set itself up or erect itself into a whole ... the continual questioning from below of any attempt to establish order from above' (Critchley, 2007, pp. 122-23). Following on from this, he suggests that this is similar to contemporary forms of anarchism that he sees as operative in groups such as Ya Basta! and the Rebel Clown Army, who have created a form of civil disobedience that troubles the state through satirical pressure, using humour to show new political possibilities and alternatives to the current state of the situation. Critchley argues that such forms of neo-anarchism can be distinguished from earlier forms of

anarchism, for example, 1960s anarchist impulses, which he sees as ‘libertarian and linked to the sexual revolution’ (p. 125). What is distinctive, he argues, about contemporary forms of anarchism, which link them to the Levinasian idea of subjectivity, is their emphasis on responsibility, flowing ‘from an experience of conscience about the manifold ways in which the West ravages the rest; it is an ethical outrage at... yawning inequality, impoverishment and disenfranchisement... It is an anarchism of the other human being who place me under a heteronomous demand rather than an anarchism of the autonomous self’ (pp. 125-26).

At this point, let me interrupt to consider an alternative argument, that the autonomous subject of liberal moral philosophy would *equally* express outrage at unjust wars, unrestrained corporate, military capitalism, etc.: the heteronomous subject does not have a monopoly on responding to the wrongs that Critchley lists above. While clearly a conception of rational, autonomous subjectivity, as articulated by Rawls, for example, can point towards a similar outrage at specific injustices, Levinas’s description leads us towards a different understanding of the meaning of moral responsibility, as I will show in relation to the idea of teachers’ responsibility and subjectivity.

To return to Critchley, while I find his interpretation original and provocative, his neo-anarchism is problematic when considering what this means for understanding the idea of teachers as political subjects, for three reasons:

1. A Levinasian understanding of political subjectivity does not necessarily gesture towards the political anarchism advocated by Critchley.
2. If we take seriously the idea that teachers are always already responsible, as Levinas describes his own experience of being confronted by pedagogical demands that impinge in a very concrete manner, the political space of their subjectivity, in which they negotiate the space between the ontological and the ethical, is very real, but ultimately aporetic.

3. While the type of carnivalesque neo-anarchism he advocates might be a helpful way of conceiving of political demonstrations, when we consider the situation of teachers, or other professionals employed by the state whose roles are institutionalised, it is less easy to see the relevance of these modes of resistance.

Let us consider how these objections are linked. Although it is *possible* to see Levinas's articulation of anarchism leading to political anarchism, I would argue that both Levinas's footnote on anarchism referred to above and his writings on Zionism would appear to set his understanding of ethical anarchism *at a distance* from the more usual political understanding of the term. Indeed it is striking that Critchley does not seem to confront these writings when considering the meaning of political subjectivity for Levinas. Caygill interprets the same footnote as implying that Levinas distinguishes his an-archy from the anarchist political movement, suggesting that Levinas's 'anarchism signifies a politics of the trace, a politics of disturbance rather than of constitution' (Caygill, 2002, p. 138). Levinas himself appears to align his philosophy with the liberal idea of democracy, in which there is space for difference and a prophetic politics as the operation of conscience, calling for the exercise of an always better justice, 'beyond the straight line of the law' (*TI*, p. 235). Responsibility is anarchic, irreducible to knowledge, unbounded by any state, but Levinas does suggest that it is necessary to have a state, to have laws, to bring about freedom. The institutionalisation of laws is necessary for there to be justice and freedom, as we have already discussed (*CP*, p. 17). While that process of institutionalisation may be insufficient, Levinas prophetically attests to the idea that politics should have a messianic vision, guided by the good manifested in the idea of fraternity. The process of institutionalising justice 'should be guided by ethical conscience and by the hope that its institutions and its citizens will live just lives' (Morgan, 2007, p. 405).

There is not scope here to provide a detailed analysis of the varying and often problematic attitudes towards the State of Israel we see within Levinas's writings<sup>13</sup>, but they appear to suggest that the an-archy he describes requires more in terms of justice than the exertion of

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<sup>13</sup> For detailed commentary on the various positions Levinas seems to take, see Morgan, 2007, pp. 395-414; Caygill, 2002, pp. 159-98.

satirical pressure against the State that Critchley suggests. The difficulties and evasions of Levinas's discussions of the State of Israel reflect the tensions that must necessarily arise when considering the adjustment between the sense of a universal, infinitely demanding ethics, and a political ontology that acts in a totalising and violent manner. We see in these Levinas's hope for a State that might embody the demands of justice and the political philosophy of monotheism, perhaps most clearly articulated in his 1971 essay 'The State of Caesar and the State of David', and this certainly seems a considerable distance from the neoanarchism advocated by Critchley. Yet when considering the situation of teachers operating within political systems that are disappointing, his writings on the State of Israel are perhaps not the most helpful starting point. When writing in more general terms about the relation between the 'State' and responsibility, Levinas emphasises that it is necessary to think about responsibility in a concrete manner, with a concern that goes beyond the operations of the State. The State must inevitably involve totalising operations, as we explored earlier in relation to *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*: for there to be justice, there must be judgement, which means there must be totalising comparisons, bringing the other within the order of a genus, institutions defending the rights of the others, and my rights also. But the state is possible only in totality *and* infinity: whilst the operations of the state must necessarily be totalising, the desire for justice and the surplus of responsibility always exceed the demands of the State. Levinas articulates the way the excessive demand for justice is always present within the current imperfect situation in an interview with François Poirié:

I think that the universality of the law in the State – all this violence done to the particular – is not license pure and simple, because as long as the State remains liberal its law is not yet completed and can always be more just than its actual justice. Hence a consciousness, if you will, that the justice on which the State is founded is, at this moment, still an imperfect justice. (*RB*, p. 68)

Levinas goes on to suggest though that this thinking of justice within the State must not be conceived in an abstract way: 'One has to think it in an even more concrete manner, with a preoccupation of the rights of man which is not coincident with the presence of the government' (*ibid.*). And so it is necessary within the liberal State, to work for that better justice, to question and challenge laws that fall short of both the truth of judgement and the responsibility of charity.



As a practical example of this, Levinas states, 'The suppression of the death penalty seems to me an essential thing for the coexistence of charity with justice' (p. 51). However, despite the imperfection of the liberal state, Levinas suggests that the state must be liberal to protect against totalitarianism: any 'regime which is straightaway charitable' runs 'the risk of Stalinism' (ibid.).

Although Levinas at times opposes politics to ethics, most significantly perhaps in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, in which he states that 'Politics is opposed to morality' (TI, p. 21), this is a totalitarian politics he rejects. The idea of a prophetic politics that we discussed in the previous chapter, in contrast to the totalitarian idea, represents the movement between ontology and ethics, troubling and opening up the question of where justice is to be found. In a sense, the political in Levinas's thinking is that very disjunction and yet necessary relation between ontology and ethics, and it is, as Caygill suggests, 'the lack of joint between ethics and ontology that opens the space for politics, but also leaves the character of that space undecidable' (Caygill, 2002, p. 96). Living always within the State, I am called to exercise political judgement, which may be totalising, yet Levinas's call is always for a more just politics, vigilant against the totalising operations of the State. Responding to the anarchic demands of subjectivity would lead the mature political subject to respond to concrete political disappointments and call for a better justice, working to bring about a community of neighbours in peaceful relations as we discussed in the previous chapter. Politics, as both ontological and ethical, must then necessarily operate within the realm of the said, but it is only made possible, according to Levinas, by the prior anarchic relation of responsibility. Just as my responsibility to my neighbour and all the others is infinite and in a sense deepening the more I take it up, so the demands of justice are ever extending. Because the subject always exists in a society of many others, she cannot fully attend to the demand of the other, and so the process of calculation, weighing up duties and responsibilities towards the many competing claims for attention is necessary in political judgement. These calculations and judgements are part of the ontological, but this is troubled by the an-archism of ethical responsibility, revealing to me that those calculations and judgements are not yet good enough.

Levinas's writing on the necessity of the liberal state, in 'The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other', illustrates this simultaneous disjunction and relationship between the ethical and political in his thinking. The state defends the rights of the human, but can also lead to a totalitarianism indifferent to the needs of the singular other, whence the need to disturb and question the state. Therefore:

the defence of the rights of man corresponds to a vocation *outside* the state, disposing, in a political society, of a kind of extra-territoriality, like that of prophecy in the face of the political powers of the Old Testament, a vigilance totally different from political intelligence, a lucidity not limited to yielding before the formalism of universality, but upholding justice itself in its limitations. The capacity to guarantee that extra-territoriality and that independence defines the liberal state and describes the modality according to which the conjunction of politics and ethics is intrinsically possible. (OS, p. 123)

The undecidability of that political space and vigilance, and the aporetic nature of the experience of responsibility – genuinely not knowing what is the right way to respond to multiple needs that confront me through the neighbour and all the others – therefore leads me away from the principle of neo-anarchism that Critchley advocates, as this approach seems to imply an overarching principle that the state *must* be resisted, and that visible forms of resistance in the form of protests and carnivalesque demonstrations are the best form of resistance. Levinas's emphasis on defending the rights of man *is* anarchic and takes us beyond the demands of the State, but at the same time, his writing on the death penalty for example suggests that this should lead us to seek to *change* the work of the State, so that the State enacts a better justice.

Levinas's conception of anarchic subjectivity troubles then not just Critchley's interpretation, but also the language used by Moore et al. of teachers being de-politicised. Indeed, the fact of confronting the multiple, seemingly infinite challenges that are part of the every day experience of being a teacher, could be seen as an example of the aporetic nature of responsibility, already political and ethical, that Levinas describes as the state of subjectivity. This we can see in Levinas's own account of his work at the ENIO, a passage I have referred to earlier, but it is worth pausing to consider again his description of the demands he faced there:

Concrete problems with spiritual repercussions. Facts that are always enormous. Thoughts coming back to ancient and venerable texts, always enigmatic, always disproportionate to the exegeses of a school. Here you have, in administrative and pedagogical problems, invitations to a deepening, to a becoming conscience, that is, to Scripture. (*RB*, p. 39)

Although my political context is very different, as a teacher I likewise feel the unbounded nature of responsibility - I cannot ever give as much time or attention to the needs of each of my students as they deserve, I can never have enough time to read as deeply or as fully the texts of my subject as I would like, I never have enough time to talk to my colleagues about whether or not we agree with such and such a policy - even though I too often seek, as discussed in the previous chapter, to immunise myself against the unbounded and unknowable nature of my obligations to all the others. The practicalities of my job mean that I must make decisions about how I respond to these demands, which are already within the realm of politics.

In this sense then, as a teacher I am always already, contra Moore, a political subject, my work situated between the ethical demands of my 'becoming conscience' and the ontological site of the said, within which schooling takes place. I am also aware however of the political repercussions of my work in the more usual meaning of the term. To give an obvious example: the bulk of my time in school is spent preparing students to sit public exams, and so demonstrates a conformism on my part to the political demand for an education system that encourages competition and individualism. But to speak of conformism in this way misses the complexity and aporetic nature of ethical responsibility with which every teacher is confronted in their work. I may not like the fact that I am helping, through systems of high stakes testing, to encourage amongst my students an attitude of competition and comparison, which will serve them well in a capitalist economy (even if I remind them frequently that exams are not a competition). Nevertheless, I feel a duty to each of those students, not only to draw them into a deeper understanding of my subject, but also to help them to do well in the world that they currently inhabit.

When Moore et al. speak of teachers being depoliticised, their understanding of the political action whose passing they are mourning seems to imply a willingness to mobilise for collective political action. They speak dismissively of 'isolated engagements in the internal politics of their own institutions' (Moore et al., 2002, p. 564). But for individual teachers, resisting unjust policies is an example of attending to the concrete demands with which they are faced on an immediate level, and such acts of resistance have broader political consequences. The example of the teachers refusing to teach in a classroom with CCTV may only be related to 'the internal politics of their institution', but clearly it relates to the political trend towards a surveillance society, in which the state seeks to saturate and control more areas of social life. Furthermore the case of teachers acting in rebellion to the senior management of their own school on a point of principle provides a powerful witness to students of the possibility of resisting the normalising exercise of power. In my own school, teachers were asked in a recent curriculum review what we would like to see changed. The answers given demonstrated a desire to move away from the current excessive focus on exams, preparation for exams, and league tables. The response to this was that students will now sit one less GCSE, with more time devoted to a new non-examined course in the humanities, and AS exams will be sat at the end of Year 13, together with A2 exams, so that less school time is devoted exclusively to exam preparation, with more time for non-examined courses. These are just two examples, but they are indicative of the fact that speaking of teachers as depoliticised does not take seriously the idea that teachers may *already* be aware of the political implications of their practices and judgements, and that they are already responding to their own political disappointment in different ways. Their decisions to strike or not to strike are therefore reflective not of depoliticisation, but of the difficult nature of discharging the unbounded, an-archic responsibilities of their profession.

To speak in this way of the unbounded demands of teaching might sound demotivating. However, this need not be the case. Failure, or the sense that I could have done more, or should have acted differently is, according to this view of responsibility, inevitable. But this should not be seen as leading to further disappointment. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Critchley expresses how this unboundedness of responsibility should rather be 'viewed as the condition for courage

in ethical action. The motto for ethical subjectivity is given by Beckett in *Worstwood Ho*, “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” (Critchley, 2007, p. 55). That ‘trying again’ might be seen as dependent on the exercise of hope. Let us now turn to consider how we might, drawing on this conception of anarchic ethical subjectivity, articulate an alternative discourse of hope.

### Levinas, Badiou and the Meaning of Hope

I have already outlined how several educational theorists have used a discourse of hope in responding to political frustrations with education, and I would agree with the emphasis that they place on its political significance. But if, as the teacher cited by Halpin suggests, many teachers *do* feel a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness about their profession and the impossibility of meeting the demands made of them, how is it possible to provide an alternative and more motivating account of hope?

Badiou, in a discussion with Critchley held at the Slought Foundation in 2007<sup>14</sup>, criticised his focus on disappointment. Badiou instead argued that political subjectivity must begin with the experience of a victory. I would agree that motivations for political resistance tend to be rooted in at least some experience of a promise, a success. But such subjective victories are often inseparable from the disappointment that motivates action leading to the experience of victory. In the following passage from ‘Messianic Texts’, we see how Levinas describes the experience of political disappointment and cynicism:

suppose for a moment that the moral ends which politics prides itself on achieving, but amends and limits by virtue of achieving them – that these ends appear steeped in the immorality that claims to sustain them; suppose, in other words, that you have lost the meaning of the political and the consciousness of its grandeur, that the non-sense or non-value of world politics is your first certainty... (DF, p. 94)

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<sup>14</sup> This can be downloaded from <http://slought.org/content/11385/>, accessed 13.08.09

Levinas goes on to consider how from this moment of experiencing of political hopelessness, 'my responsibility is the more irreplaceable... At this point the real universality, which is non-catholic, can affirm itself. It consists in serving the universe. It is called messianism' (p. 95).

In 'Teaching Our Way Out When Nobody Knows the Way', Edgoose has offered an illuminating discussion of how this messianism might be related to the question of hope. He distinguishes between Christian and Marxist understandings of hope, which see history as a process oriented towards a future victory, with the Judaic understanding of messianism, in which the *present* moment is the one in which there is the possibility of the messianic. He cites Walter Benjamin as an example of this:

We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogenous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter. (Benjamin cited in Edgoose, 2008, p. 102)<sup>15</sup>

Edgoose explains this contrast between 'empty time' and 'messianic time' as the contrast between the idea of 'time comprised of empty blocks to be filled with activity' and 'an understanding of time rooted in the Judaic experience of the divine' (ibid.). He links this latter understanding of messianic time with what he describes as a Levinasian conception of hope, in which the meaning of the future and the direction of history is left radically open:

Nothing sets the orientation of the future. The open future of Judaic messianism depends upon our abdication of the sense that we know how the world works, or that we can discern the tide of history, or that we have adequate tools from the past. It is a focusing on the suffering of the world without the reassurances of narratives of liberation or oppression. (p. 105)

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<sup>15</sup> While both Levinas and Benjamin might reject a linear eschatology, they nevertheless have different approaches to history and politics. As Morgan notes, 'the major difference between the two... concerns politics – the nexus of economic, social, and organizational structures and institutions that makes up our public lives. Here Levinas is guarded but more sanguine than Benjamin, who is decidedly negative.' (Morgan, 2007, p. 400)

This idea of hope is, in contrast with eschatological and teleological Christian and post-Christian approaches, opposed to both teleology and eschatology. It challenges conceptions of hope that we have seen in theorists such as Halpin, which Edgoose argues 'risk being uncomfortable impositions on students' and 'a denial of the very real complexities of the world itself' (p. 106). Levinas's understanding of messianism is focused on both the present and its interruption by what is never present, as beyond being and presence. The messianic, breaking the closed circle of totality, can be seen as what is implied by the ideal of prophetic politics, a politics that would be vigilant against the violence of totalisation and work towards peaceful, fraternal communities. Morgan expresses this clearly:

Messianism involves all those commitments that are concerned with our responsibilities to others; it is about realizing ethics in our lives. Politics is about the institutions of organized social life that enable us to live together and with one another. Politics should have a messianic vision; it should be guided by ethical conscience and by the hope that its institutions and its citizens will live just lives. Messianism and politics are both unavoidable features of all our lives. (Morgan, 2007, p. 405)

Although there appear to be utopian moments in Levinas's writing, given that this idea of messianism begins with pouring our attention into very real relationships and the complex demands of the world in which we live, in a responsibility that suspends totality, I do not think it is helpful to describe this messianism as utopian. In 'Place and Utopia', we see that Levinas prefers not to describe ethical responsibility as utopian:

One can uproot oneself from this responsibility, deny the place where it is incumbent on me to do something, to look for an anchorite's salvation. One can choose Utopia. On the other hand, in the name of spirit, one can choose not to flee the conditions from which one's work draws its meaning and remain here below. And that means choosing ethical action. (*DF*, p. 100)

In thinking about the infinite demands of education, the response that teachers must give is always rooted in the present moment, and it is from responding to these demands that their work draws its meaning. Whilst there is undoubtedly a future-oriented motivation in their work, towards creating a better future for those they teach, most teachers derive the meaning of their

work primarily from their experiences in the present, which are already bound up with the past and future, and that this should therefore be central to our understanding of hope in education, rather than any teleological or utopian conception.

Edgoose suggests that it is in the present experience of encounter with their students that teachers might find the source of hope. In the section of *Totality and Infinity* exploring fecundity, Levinas describes a view of the future that is ‘both my own and non-mine, a possibility of myself but also a possibility of the other’ (*TI*, p. 267). Edgoose interprets this as suggesting that the future is dependent on our interactions with others and is therefore unpredictable, as every teacher will have found – ‘the best laid lesson plan is necessarily subject to the unpredictability of classroom dynamics’ (Edgoose, 2008, p. 108). But this unpredictability of the encounter can be a source of hope for two reasons:

First, it reminds us of the meaninglessness of our naïve sense that we know the direction of the future... Hope... depends on otherness, on our students being distinct others whose words and actions surprise our expectations...

The second way in which Levinas’s dialogical future brings hope is in the ways in which teachers’ and students’ fates are intertwined... [in] teaching we are made most aware of the threads of responsibility which bind us, and the extent to which our future is entwined with the futures of those with whom we have interacted... In teaching, these threads are the clearest and perhaps most difficult to ignore. (p. 109)

Edgoose acknowledges that obviously that unpredictability of the teacher-student relationship can lead to both negative and positive surprises. It is, however, in those unpredictable bonds of interdependency and responsibility that he locates Levinas’s statement that ‘The pupil-teacher relationship... contains all the riches of the meeting with the Messiah’ (*DF*, p. 85).

Edgoose’s conception of Levinasian hope, as anti-utopian, found in the everyday possibilities of the encounters between teachers and students, revealing the ways our futures are intimately bound up together, is beautifully articulated and gestures towards what many teachers probably *do* find to be the most motivating aspect of their profession. However, I do not think a conception of hope founded on the teacher-student relationship goes far enough. While a teacher



may experience his responsibility to his students as the primary motivating element of his work and thus the source of his hope, his response and responsibilities are also already bound up with wider political judgements and his place within the current state of the situation. Therefore this understanding of hope needs to be seen as related not just to the teacher-student relationship, but also to Levinas's understanding of prophetic politics and his conception of messianic consciousness, interrupting the totalising tendencies of political ontology. This understanding of messianic consciousness implies not only a vigilance against the violence of the State, and a working towards a State which enacts a better justice (*BV*, pp. 179-81) but also an interruption of the way we think of education in a linear, developmental sense. This idea of the messianic suggests that within every meeting of self and neighbour, in every taking up of responsibility, is the possibility of peace, the possibility of a politics that works for a better justice, and thus a new beginning. Preceding the discussion of messianic consciousness in 'The Infinity of Time' in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas discusses the way in which each present moment gives to 'the past a new meaning', which 'weighs upon the present instant, "laden with all the past", even if it is pregnant with the whole future' (*TI*, p. 282). This leads towards an understanding of time that is discontinuous, opening up the idea of 'an absolute youth and recommencement' as possibilities in every moment, just as in every encounter with the Other there are infinite possibilities of new beginnings and a better justice.

Although this idea of the vigilance of messianic consciousness might sound somewhat abstract, we can see concrete ways in which it interrupts totalising tendencies of political ontology. We have already considered the following Talmudic reading from 'The Nations and the Presence of Israel' in Chapter 4, but it is worth repeating here as a clear example of how Levinas sees 'rays of Messianic light' as both revealing and suspending the totalising tendencies of an ever-extending capitalist logic:

those rays break the evil spell of *having* by which being insists on being. They offer a glimpse at a future suspension of the heaping up, the amassing, the accumulation by which, for being-in the advent of its being – it is ever again a question of its own being. A forgetting, a failure to recognize the other! A piling up, amassing, unending totalization of the objects and money that mark the rhythm and essential

structure of the perseverance of being in its being. Its concrete modes: stock-piling and banks. But also men at war. A suspect ontology! (*TN*, p. 108)

Caygill points out that in this passage Levinas equates Heideggerian ontology with the logic and idols of commercial totality and capitalist accumulation, and also the accumulation of military power by the state. He goes on to suggest that 'Messianic peace and justice consist in the suspension of totality... The messianic is manifest as the Sabbath, or suspension of the "suspect ontology" informing the idols of the accumulation of wealth and power' (Caygill, 2002, p. 197). The enormous challenge for the teacher as a mature political subject is to consider how she might respond *both* to the immediate and already infinite demands of her students, parents, subject discipline etc., *and* to a political demand to disrupt the way that the logic of education is perverted by the logic of accumulation, not just through the methodology of marketisation and the language of the service industry as we discussed earlier, but also through the way that education is conceived as a process of amassing demonstrable skills which can be clearly measured and evaluated.

To think of a teacher as a political subject in this way recognises that the demands of her profession are always enormous, and further deepening the more she attends to the political significance of her role. Therefore, also needed in this understanding of hope, rooted in anarchic responsibility and prophetic politics is recognition of the importance of tenacity. Badiou, like Levinas, conceives of hope in an anti-utopian manner, as tenacity, the principle of struggle, and the quality of endurance that means the subject continues in the struggle – 'a simple imperative of continuation, a principle of tenacity, of obstinacy' (*SP*, p. 93). This is founded not on disappointment, but on the experience of a victory, which motivates the subject to endure, to struggle for the sake of that hope. Hope, he argues, is not hope in a future victory, but 'it is a subjective victory that produces hope' (p. 95). The idea of hope rooted in the teacher-student relationship emphasised by Edgoose provides an example of this: it is those moments when I have seen a student excited, enthused and inspired through what they have learnt that frequently provide motivation for me to continue in my task. Yet, that experience of a victory can also be found in the interactions between individual teachers and the hierarchical powers of their

institutions, or political authorities. In the debate between the NAHT and government over the boycotting of the SATS, the actual experience of speaking out against a system of assessment that appears to go against their own educational ideals can be seen as an experience of a subjective victory in the act of finding a shared voice for those concerns. This subjective victory then produces hope amongst those teachers who will continue to struggle against what they see as an educational wrong.

This element of struggle involved in perseverance, which all teachers would see as an element of their profession, is an important element of a non-utopian conception of hope. It is this quality of hope as enabling endurance that means that when faced with political disappointment, most teachers do not give up. Even if they feel they have nothing left to give and are all too aware of their failure to meet all the needs that are addressed to them, anarchically, most persevere, with the sense as in *Waiting for Godot*: 'I can't go on. I'll go on.' According to Badiou's particular conception of political subjectivity, not all teachers would be political subjects, since his definition of politics sees politics as always operating at a distance from the state.<sup>16</sup> We have seen through Moore et al.'s research that the relationship between teachers' political self-understanding and dominant political discourses is, however, complex, and many teachers would not see themselves as acting at a distance from the state. However, there is, if we follow Levinas's understanding of an-archic subjectivity and the ways in which this is always already implicated in politics, a sense in which the teacher *is* already a political subject, even if she may not describe herself in this way.

If we are to take seriously a Levinasian reading of the meaning of hope, in which what happens depends on me and the other and the relationship between us, which cannot be separated from my responsibility to all the others, then, to return to Celan's poem that Badiou refers to, the world, rushing up, really does depend on me. I may be in denial of this, and may refuse to accept

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<sup>16</sup> See for example, his analysis in *Metapolitics*, in which he states: 'Organised in anticipation of surprises, diagonal to representations, experimenting with lacunae, accounting for infinite singularities, politics is an active thought that is both subtle and dogged; one from which the material critique of all forms of presentative correlations proceeds, and which, operating on the edge of the void, calls on homogenous multiplicities against the heterogenous order of the State which claims to prevent their appearance' (*M*, p. 77).

that my responsibility is unbounded, but Levinas's writing on the an-archic demands of the many others who confront me leads to a view that teachers should recognise that their actions *do* have significance, at ethical and political levels. Žižek is critical of Levinas and Critchley's neo-anarchism as too conservative and unable to change existing inequalities:

Critchley's anarchic ethico-political agent acts like a superego, comfortably bombarding the state with demands; and the more the state tries to satisfy these demands, the more guilty it seems to be. In compliance with this logic, the anarchic agents focus their protest not on open dictatorships, but on the hypocrisy of liberal democracies, who are accused of betraying their own professed principles. (Žižek, 2007, p. 3)

Žižek uses the example of Hugo Chávez to suggest that a better response to political grievance is seizing state power. If we look, however, to the complex relationship between teachers and the state that employs them, I do not think that Žižek's approach of seizing state power, operating firmly within a post-Christian / Marxist conception of history and hope, is necessarily a practical way for teachers to think about what can be done in the situation in which they find themselves. If the political space is radically undecidable, and the future is radically unpredictable, then the best way for teachers to confront disappointment cannot be set out in advance according to one principle such as either seizing state power or resisting it, but must start from thinking through how to respond to concrete problems and demands with both better justice and charity.

The challenge for teachers is to deepen their sense that their actions *do* have significance and for them to reflect on a hope founded in their everyday work that will inspire them to challenge the political injustices they encounter. In responding to the unbounded demands of conscience, within the state and yet disturbing its totalising operations, their political subjectivity might be prophetic as it seeks to work for a better justice, or in this case, a better education. I have already pointed out that in *Beyond Learning*, following on from his reading of Levinas, Biesta is pessimistic about the possibility of education leading to a more democratic society:

Because subjectivity is no longer something that only occurs or is created in schools, the approach to democratic education that follows from my considerations puts the question about the responsibility for democratic education back where it actually

belongs, namely, in society at large. It is an illusion to think that schools alone can produce democratic citizens. (Biesta, 2006, p. 144)

Whilst I would not wish to exaggerate the difference that schools can make, I am more optimistic than this about the difference schools can make to the political subjectivity of students through the example of teachers' awareness of their own political judgements. Many of the students I have taught are involved in various forms of political activism at many different levels, from attending demonstrations and protests against specific injustices in the manner celebrated by Critchley, to committed involvement with parliamentary political parties, seeking in ways they are only beginning to explore, how they can work to bring about a better justice. I do not think that this is unrelated to the different individual political judgements that they see their teachers making.

Edgoose draws attention to how the unpredictability of a Levinasian conception of hope as anarchic can lead us to have greater faith in the meaning of our actions, even if we see no resolution to current grievances. He cites a provocative passage from Vaclav Havel to illustrate this:

You have certainly heard of the 'butterfly effect'. It is a belief that everything in the world is so mysteriously and completely interconnected that a slight, seemingly insignificant wave of a butterfly's wings in a single spot on this planet can unleash a typhoon thousands of miles away.

I think we must believe in this effect for politics. We cannot assume that our microscopic yet truly unique everyday actions are of no consequence simply because they cannot resolve the immense problems of today. That would be an *a priori* nihilistic assertion, and an expression of the arrogant, modern rationality that believes it knows how the world works. (Havel, 1994, p. 93, cited in Edgoose, 2008, p. 111)

Teachers, as political subjects, do make a difference, in the way that Havel and Levinas suggest.<sup>17</sup> The challenge is to become more aware of this an-archic nature of responsibility, in

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<sup>17</sup> In his letters from prison to his wife Olga, Havel refers to his reading of Levinas on several occasions. The following comments demonstrate his admiration for the philosopher: 'Levinas's idea that "something must begin," that responsibility establishes an ethical situation that is asymmetrical, and that this cannot be preached but upheld,

which the meaning of political subjectivity is aporetic. In the difficult everyday demands with which they are already engaged, in deciding how to respond to the needs that confront them, teachers should be aware and take heart from the knowledge and hope that their actions have significance in this unpredictable and undetermined way. My hope, arising from my own developing self-awareness of the political implications of my actions, is for other teachers to also become more attentive to the political significance of their day-to-day actions, an attentiveness which might lead them to seek more control of the sites where they work, and to resist unjust policies and the distortion of the very meaning of education through the rhetorics of accumulation, service and performativity.

While it is possible to respond to disappointment through accommodating one's thinking in line with dominant political discourses, as Moore's research demonstrated, the response to which this an-archic conception of subjectivity could lead us instead is resistance and a refusal to allow our discourses and thinking about education to be colonised by neoliberal rhetorics which, as Badiou argues, appear to obliterate politics by management and can obliterate the meaning of education itself. To resist such discourses, obedient to the demands of responsibility, unbounded by the state, would be just one aspect of striving for a better justice. Given Levinas's admiration for Celan, it is appropriate to conclude by returning to the poem cited by Badiou with which I began this chapter. As in this poem, justice is found, despite my wishes for firmer ground, in inconsistencies and unpredictable demands, and it is only on these that I can find my footing and support myself. The demands of conscience that the teacher experiences and on which their subjectivity depends, are infinite, like those two fingers snapping in the abyss, and ask for more than I contain. But through those fingers snapping, a world rushes up and rushes forward, in scribblebooks, and that *does*, even if I mostly choose to ignore or deny that fact, depend on me.

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corresponds in every detail with my experience and opinion. In other words, I am responsible for the state of the world.' (Havel, cited in Malka, 2006, p. 82)

## Coda

But is this all? Is this Celan poem with which the final chapter opened a disappointing end? Does this reading of Levinas only take me as far as the Platonic sense of the need to return to the cave, to go back to the everyday demands of teaching?

I do not think this is so. We have been taken beyond the need to return to the cave to the sense that the demands of education, infinite in what they ask of us, gesture towards the promised land of goodness. We have seen how Levinas invites us to view education in a radically different way, beginning with the scene of teaching, in which the very possibilities of thought, knowledge, language, society and justice depend on my prior condition of responsivity as responsibility, an infinite responsibility that deepens the more I take it up. Thus education can never be contained within the more limited aims of developing cognitive rationality, or acquiring measurable and demonstrable skills of critique and evaluation. But it is not enough just to recognise this richer vision of education. Just as the neighbour persecutes me and draws me into an uncomfortable position of responsibility, so Levinas leads us to an awareness of the vertiginous heights of responsibility, challenging us to go ‘beyond the straight line of the law, that is, of finding a place lying beyond the universal’ (*TI*, p. 245) in working for a better justice. It is not enough just to carry on as before, hoping for moments in which the ‘other’ community might come to presence, as Biesta suggests. But at the same time, I cannot set out in advance what all the requirements for a better education in this sense might be, as such an approach would end up relying ‘on the ineffective brutality of constraints imposed by the totalitarian State’ (*DF*, p. 288).

I have shown that both teachers and students are always *already* ethical and political subjects, and that this understanding of subjectivity beginning in responsibility deepens the more we

attend to it. It is through this condition of responsibility that education, knowledge and truth are possible: 'This curvature of the intersubjective space inflects distance into elevation; it does not falsify being, but makes its truth first possible' (*TI*, p. 291). Reading Levinas disturbs us by challenging us to recognise that deepening responsibility, and inviting us to work for a better education, aware of the totalisation that must take place within education, yet always vigilant in trying to bring about a more just State. As ethical and political subjects, our actions as educators and students *already* have political and ethical significance, but Levinas invites us to become more conscious of the meaning of that significance and ensure that our work leads to educational institutions that enact a better justice, working not from some utopian conception of hope, but rooted in the specific situations in which we find ourselves, thinking these demands of justice 'in an even more concrete manner, with a preoccupation with the rights of man which is not coincident with the presence of government' (*RB*, p. 68).

Within the current political context in which my work as a teacher is situated, I have demonstrated that this approach interrupts dominant educational discourses that can become totalising: Levinas challenges us to recognise that self-sufficient rational autonomy, which since the Enlightenment has been the goal of education, is a myth, and also exposes, with Badiou, the limitations of the totalising, all-encompassing logic of capitalist accumulation. Reading Levinas invites us to work towards an education in which the dominance of these approaches is suspended, and in which we attend to the possibility of more peaceful relations with our neighbours, a more attentive reading of texts, and a more disciplined performance of rituals that will not serve to perpetuate existing injustices and inequalities, but will manifest the ideal of a community rooted in illeity and fraternity. Within the situation in which I find myself, as a teacher of RE, I have considered some of the ways Levinas has led me to see the limitations of the current dominant frameworks of my subject, and work towards the possibility of a religious education otherwise. I would not wish to set out the challenges that Levinas poses for other subject disciplines, since such questions would be better attended to by those working within those disciplines. But through all subject disciplines, what Levinas bears witness to is the call



for an education that attends to the an-archic responsibility that is always already there, and a more demanding reading of the texts and of the language that has come to us, as a grace.

Levinas articulates something of this demanding task in his essays 'Ethics and Spirit' and 'A Religion for Adults'. In these, Levinas outlines the Jewish understanding of education that 'consist[s] in instituting a link between man and the saintliness of God and in maintaining man in this relationship' (*DF*, p. 14). This saintliness of God is no numinous religious experience, but the demand of social justice for my response to the appeal addressed to me through the face with peace rather than violence:

The face ... is inviolable; those eyes, which are absolutely without protection, the most naked part of the human body, none the less offer an absolute resistance to possession, an absolute resistance in which the temptation to murder is inscribed: the temptation of absolute negation. The Other is the only being that one can be tempted to kill. This temptation to murder and this impossibility of murder constitute the very vision of the face. To see a face is already to hear 'You shall not kill', and to hear 'You shall not kill' is to hear 'Social justice'....

'You shall not kill' is therefore not just a simple rule of conduct; it appears as the principle of discourse itself and of spiritual life. Henceforth, language is not only a system of signs... Speech belongs to the order of morality before belonging to that of theory. Is it not therefore the condition for conscious thought? (pp. 8-9).

To have language, to have conscious thought, as I have explored, means to have received the command not to kill, to have heard the demand for justice. Any understanding of educative community, the existence of many held together by dialogues, texts, rituals and traditions, depends on this prior condition of already having heard the demand for peaceful response.

Education is possible because of my exposure to the appeal of the human face. In responding to this, I respond to God:

Man begins in the desert, where he dwells in tents, and adores God in a transportable temple.

From this existence – free with regard to landscapes and architectures, all those heavy and sedentary things that one is tempted to prefer to man – Judaism recalls, in the course of its whole history, that it is rooted in the countryside or in the town... Freedom with regard to the sedentary forms of existence is, perhaps, the human way to be in this world. For Judaism, the world becomes intelligible before a human face and not, as for a great contemporary philosopher who sums up an important aspect of the West, through houses, temples and bridges. (*DF*, pp. 22-3)

This philosopher, who prefers houses, temples and bridges, ‘those heavy sedentary things that one is tempted to prefer to man’, is Heidegger, representing the tendency to attend to structures, whether of knowledge, institutions, ideologies, or principles, in contrast with radical openness and hospitality towards the Other, my neighbour, a hospitality in which my self-sufficiency is undone. Within education likewise, it is possible to see how the structures of self-sufficient autonomy, efficiency and utility can become sedentary and totalising: what is required is a conception of education that refuses to be limited by such totalising logics but, always in movement, breaches the ethical and intellectual closure represented by such approaches.

This leads us to question which texts, traditions and rituals should be carried together on the journey, not as ‘heavy, sedentary things’ that we might ‘prefer to man’, but rather as those that will lead to greater awareness of how ‘the world becomes intelligible before a human face’. Moreover, this notion of education leads us to consider the very way in which these things are carried together, and handed over, as a gift, to those being taught, in which what is learnt depends on that teaching coming from the face. Malka, who was a student of Levinas at the ENIO, described how Levinas used to say, recalling Husserl, ‘We do not dissociate a lesson from the face that was the necessary interlocutor’ (Malka, 2002, p. xxxiv). While Levinas has led us to consider the face through which we are taught as not just the face of the specific human teacher, but the manifestation of the Other, we can see through Levinas’s comment here that the way in which texts, traditions, rituals, are brought to us, the way in which they are handed on, affects the way in which the gift is received.

This can be connected with the way in which Levinas alludes to the blessing and danger of fire, as highlighted by Caygill. In ‘Means of Identification’, Levinas describes how Jewish identity is

inscribed in 'difficult books, and plunges us into strict and laborious study' (*DF*, p. 52). He goes on to question, however:

Are the true books just books? Or are they also the embers still glowing in the ashes, as Rabbi Eliezer called the words of the Prophets? In this way, the flame traverses History without burning in it. But the truth illuminates whoever breathes on the flame and coaxes it back to life. More or less. It's a question of breath. To admit the effect that literature has on men is perhaps the ultimate wisdom of the West in which the people of the Bible may recognize themselves. (p. 53)

Caygill emphasises how in this passage the reader takes the place of the priest attending to burnt offerings in the Temple: this reading, breathing on the embers, 'provoke[s] fire and light..., a light which exceeds the breath sacrificed to raise it' (Caygill, 2002, p. 200). It is the task of the teacher to read in such a way that they breathe onto the texts that they have chosen, a reading that requires effort, the sacrifice of breath, in coaxing flames from the embers.

As emphasised in Chapter 6, I am not, in highlighting the importance of reading, presenting an apology for the canon. To read, as I have already stated, is not in any way 'the litany or pious murmur of a consent given beforehand' (*TR*, p. 8). Levinas describes how the practice of Talmudic reading is always 'in search of problems and truths' (p. 9) and seeks to translate a text's meanings to modern languages, linking such texts 'in an immediate way to the present and to the present's understanding' (p. 6). My desire in this thesis is to have engaged in a reading of 'Levinas' 'in search of problems and truths', and translating the truths of this reading to some, although by no means all, present understandings of education and concrete demands that teachers encounter in their work. But this reading is also the very task of education, an act of translation dependent upon the fidelity and hope of the teacher, her responsibility, and the responsivity of the one who is taught.

This idea of education orients our relation to knowledge, language and community differently from conceptions emphasising commonality, consensus and co-operation. This can be compared with the distinction Standish highlights between the idea of justice beginning in conversation and a Rawlsian justice beginning in co-operation, drawing on Stanley Cavell's articulation of a

'conversation of justice'. Standish highlights how the way of being together that begins from an ideal of co-operation - suggesting 'the idea of a society as a whole either as having a project or, at the other extreme, as being a neutral field in which each can pursue his or her own projects' (Cavell, cited in Standish, 2007, p. 87) - limits our participation in working together in community. In contrast with this,

Conversation ... emphasises neither any given ambition of a society nor a field of fairness for individual projects. It draws attention to the opacity of our interactions, which are seen as the outcome of a history of attempts to reform ourselves in the direction of justice. It requires listening, responsiveness to difference, and willingness to change. (Standish, 2007, p. 87)

To read in the way Levinas suggests might be seen as conversation in this sense, recalling how conversation is described as a teaching in *Totality and Infinity*, a conversation in which I am brought more than I contain. In such conversation my responsibility deepens in attending to the demands that the texts bring me, demands that reveal 'invitations to a deepening, to a becoming conscience' (RB, p. 39) in the concrete situations in which I find myself.

These texts that are carried and read together on the journey are not the same as roots: the only 'anchor' for this understanding of education is the demand of my neighbour through which I am subjected and can have language and meaning. But this rootless journey, free from the idea of existence as sedentary and settled, always in exile, leads to the possibility of greater freedom:

This freedom is not in the last bit pathological, or strained or heartrending. It relegates the values to do with roots and institutes other forms of fidelity and responsibility. Man, after all, is not a tree and humanity is not a forest. It promotes more human forms, for they presuppose a conscious commitment; freer forms, for they allow us to glimpse a human society and horizons vaster than those of the village where we were born. (p. 23)

And it is my hope that in the potential for glimpsing such horizons, glimpsing a human society beyond 'the village where we were born', we might come to understand the very meaning of what it is and what it could be to be educated, and respond with hope to the infinite, anarchic

demands for an always better justice, working towards a better State in which charity and truth can breathe.

# Appendix

## Publications including material from chapters of this thesis

### Peer reviewed

(in press) A Religious Education Otherwise? An examination and proposed interruption of current British practice, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*.

(in press) Religious Language as Poetry: Heidegger's challenge, *Heythrop Journal*.

(2010) 'The obliteration of truth by management: Badiou, St. Paul and the question of economic managerialism in education', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, special issue Alain Badiou: 'Becoming subject' to education, 42 (2), pp. 230-250.

(2009) 'And who is my neighbour? Levinas and the commandment to love re-examined', *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 19 (2), pp. 145-166.

(2007) 'Bringing Me More Than I Contain...': Discourse, Subjectivity and the Scene of Teaching, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 41(3), pp. 411-30.

### Invited articles

(2009 forthcoming) What is Religious Education? An Examination and Critique of Current British practice, *The Proceedings of the Second International Colloquium between the Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University and the Institute of Education, University of Kyoto* (University of Kyoto Press).

(2009) 'Je est un Autre': Writing and the Otherness of the Self, *The Proceedings of the International Colloquium between the Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University and the Institute of Education, University of London* (University of Kyoto Press) pp. 95-100.

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